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**Never Letting Go: Trauma and Childhood in Kazuo
Ishiguro's Novels**

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INTRODUCTION

I'm not at all interested in the brave who fight against the odds and win. I am interested in those who accept their lot, as that is what many people in the world are doing. They do their best in ghastly conditions. (Ishiguro, from the interview 'This much I know')

Kazuo Ishiguro, born on 8 November 1952 in Nagasaki, is widely regarded as one of the greatest and most influential contemporary British authors, having been cited by *The Times* as being one of the fifty greatest British writers since 1945; in 2017 he was awarded with the Nobel Prize for literature, with the rationale that "[he], in novels of great emotional force, has uncovered the abyss beneath our illusory sense of connection with the world" (nobelprize.org). Most of all, Ishiguro is renowned for his insightful portrayal of the workings of human memory, as well as for his clear yet understated writing style.

In this thesis, I will analyze five of Ishiguro's novels with regard to their portrayal of both trauma and childhood, and how these two notions reconnect to each other, to each novel's general themes, and to their representation in the other works. The novels that have been chosen for this study are five: *A Pale View of Hills*, *The Unconsoled*, *When We Were Orphans*, *Never Let Me Go*, and *The Buried Giant*. The reason behind this choice is that I believe these novels to be the most salient when it comes to the topics of trauma and childhood among Ishiguro's works, and they present thematic throughlines for these two notions that, I would argue, deserve more detailed and careful analysis.

Finally, the reason behind the choice of this topic is that, while representations of trauma in Ishiguro have been discussed extensively, to my knowledge the same cannot be said when it comes to childhood, either as a subject in its own right or in its relation to traumatic experience. It is my contention that these notions are worth delving into in order to gain a better understanding of one of the most prominent authors of this century and the last – an author who, despite his relatively limited production, has managed to create one of the most insightful portrayals of human memory – one so often streaked with childhood trauma - in recent literature.

CHAPTER 1:

WORKINGS OF MEMORY: TRAUMA AND CHILDHOOD IN THEORY AND IN THE NOVELS OF KAZUO ISHIGURO

As one of the most important contemporary British novelists, Ishiguro's works have been the subject of an extensive and diverse corpus of literary criticism. Most of the essays and articles about his novels had to contend, in one form or the other, with the theme of memory that recurs, almost obsessively, throughout his body of work. Due to their very tight relationship with the thematical pillar that memory represents, the themes of childhood and especially trauma have also been often explored with various degrees of depths depending on the novel.

An especially prominent work in this regard is Drag's *Revisiting Loss: Memory, Trauma and Nostalgia in the Novels of Kazuo Ishiguro*. In the introduction, he states that the goal of his book is to "demonstrate that loss constitutes the core experience which determines the narrators' sense of identity and the shape of their subsequent past. Whether it takes the form of a *traumatic ordeal*, an act of social degradation, a failed relationship or the *loss of a home*" (p. 1, emphasis added). The second part of the book is devoted to analyzing trauma in *A Pale View of Hills* and *The Unconsoled*, two novels which Drag states "are both dedicated to exploring the ways in which memory negotiates and represents trauma" (p. 133). The third part explores the role of nostalgia in *When We Were Orphans* and *Never Let Me Go*; Drag states that "the object of [the narrators'] nostalgic longings is the innocence, safety and benevolence of *the realm of childhood*" and that "Banks's separation from Shanghai and Kathy H.'s from Hailsham assumes the status of a *traumatic loss*" (p. 135, emphasis added). While *Revisiting Loss* is primarily concerned with the eponymous thematic line, trauma and childhood represent key components of Drag's study.

On the other hand, Dean's *Killing Children in British Fiction: Thatcherism to Brexit* takes on, as the title suggests, a political perspective while analyzing the portrayal of children in three of Ishiguro's novels. In particular, he ties the representation of children and their deaths in *A Pale View of Hills* to that of 1980s Thatcherism (the decade in which the novel was written) by stating that "in subtly recognizing Thatcherism's contradictions, especially regarding the future it attempted to create via the child, *A Pale View* anticipates their explosive fragility" (p. 174). As part of a later chapter

which focuses on the figure of the migrant child, Dean discusses *When We Were Orphans* and *Never Let Me Go*, tying these novels to the British political climate of their respective years:

Just as *A Pale View of Hills* anticipated the repressed conflicts and contradictions in Thatcherism, so *Orphans* undertook a similarly bleak astute sideways look at Blairite affirmations of globalization and liberal interventionism, while *Never Let Me Go* provides an uncanny alternative history of later-twentieth-century Britain. Children and youth are central in these novels, as are the institutions that give them time and space to develop, but only in terms that prove horrendously compromised by paranoid essentialism and intergenerational violence. (p. 228)

Similarly, in her article “Childhood in Action: A Study of Natalty’s Relationship to Societal Change in *Never Let Me Go*”, Jervis uses the titular novel as a fictional case study related to the socio-political concept of natalty first formulated by Arendt. The choice falls on *Never Let Me Go* “because it conjures up characters who live in a similar world to ours but who lack the straightforward relationship to natalty that comes from being born to human parents” (p. 190). Like Dean, Jervis provides a more politically oriented reading of childhood in Ishiguro, though related to a specific philosophical topic rather than the actual historical context of the novel’s time of writing.

In general, literary criticism seems to have focused more on the theme of trauma than that of childhood when it comes to Ishiguro’s works, likely because it is the more explicit and the more narratively pivotal of the two. In the article *The Poetics of Trauma, Time, and Memory in Kazuo Ishiguro’s Early Novels*, Rusu argues that “Ishiguro’s early work is well suited for an analysis employing trauma studies methodology, especially theories of the second wave” (p. 134), highlighting the importance of this concept in reading the author’s works. Duangfai, in *Psychological Disorder and Narrative Order in Kazuo Ishiguro’s Novels*, argues that “Ishiguro does not limit his interest only to questions of psychological problems; he also explores [...] how these characters recount their stories and to what extent these narratives and techniques help them overcome their problems” (p. 9) and that “Even though trauma is not the key concept in Ishiguro’s works [...] with an understanding about trauma – especially the idea of repression and repetition – the reader can achieve a better understanding of the characters’ psychological problems” (p. 10). In the introduction to the treatise, Duangfai also mentions the various narrative techniques used by Ishiguro to portray these problems in his characters, most of all narrative unreliability, but also transference (that is, the use of ‘double’ characters who function as projections of the narrator) and displacement (subconscious replacement of a repressed object with another) as well as the author’s use of genre tropes such as the detective story.

Trauma in Ishiguro's novels is present not only at the individual level, but also at the collective one, even when the two are virtually indistinguishable. In the article 'Collective Memory in Kazuo Ishiguro's Novel *The Unconsoled*', Matović states that "While the unnamed city of the novel is interpreted as Ryder's *memoryscape*, [...] the crisis which unsettles the community is very much a modern crisis" which "has undeniable affinities with the traumatic" (pp. 193-194, emphasis in original). In analyzing Ishiguro's Japanese novels, Nguyen and Phan make a connection between trauma and identity: "Trauma and identity are interconnected concepts, with trauma often acting as a catalyst for change and redefinition of identity. [...] Consequently, we can examine this relationship through the lens of personal trauma and collective trauma, both of which can have profound impacts on personal and collective identity" (*Healing Trauma and Reconstruction of Japanese Identity*, p. 221). When it comes to Ishiguro's Japanese novels, they find that the cause of this trauma is "ideological conflicts between the old and young generations in family and society" (p. 222), which were, in turn, a consequence of World War II and how differently the two generations took part in it. They also argue that the two novels' endings symbolically provide a solution to this trauma-wrought identity crisis through "the coexisted images of the past and the present at the endings"; this positive message would be that "accepting the truth that identity is changeable and searching for connection are necessary to heal traumas caused by identity crises and reconstruct identity on a more ideal level" (p. 224) – an interestingly optimistic analysis compared to the majority of criticism regarding these novels.

The Buried Giant, by the very nature of its plot, has proved to be an especially fertile ground for analysis regarding the subject of collective trauma. Lorek-Jezińska connects this notion to that of identity: "By investigating the memory of previous wars and traumatic events and amnesia, the novel comments on how each of them might be simultaneously destructive towards and constitutive of one's personal and collective identity" (*Testimonies of Absence*, p. 43). Indeed, as it will be explained later in this chapter, the disruption of memory brought upon by traumatic events has dramatic effects on the group's identity and sense of belonging. In an interview for *The Agenda*, Ishiguro himself states that one of the main ideas behind *The Buried Giant* is "how whole nations deal with dark memories of the past, and how they can be resurrected again, sometimes quite cynically" and how "the battle over how a nation remembers is really a battle over what the nation's gonna do next". Weighing the ills and benefits of forgetting and remembering is a central theme of the novel, one that Falcus and Oró-Piqueras also underline in their article 'Ageing without Remembering' while tying it to the setting:

The novel asks us to consider what good or ill may come of remembering past collective (and individual) trauma. Central to this question is how we imagine the future and its relationship with the past. *The Buried Giant* therefore exploits the medieval and is undoubtedly very much concerned with the history of the Middle Ages, but at the same time, it employs what might be termed the neomedieval shorthand of the fantastic in its world building. (p. 2)

The importance of setting and genre in Ishiguro's novels, especially *The Buried Giant* (which Falcus and Oró-Piqueras call "immersive fantasy"), *When We Were Orphans* and *Never Let Me Go*, cannot be overstated and will be examined in further detail in the dedicated chapters.

The list of books, articles, and essays written about the topics of childhood and trauma in Ishiguro's novels could go on for several more pages, which is far from surprising when considering the depth and scope of his work despite (or perhaps because of) his relatively limited production. However, as far as I can understand from my research, barring a few exceptions neither the subject of trauma nor that of childhood in these novels has been treated in a more comprehensive and systematic manner; instead, critics seem to have focused on these subjects only within the scope of a single novel, or two at most (like Drag does in *Revisiting Loss*). This is, arguably, at least in part caused by how Ishiguro's novels distinguish themselves from one another. While they all share a few central themes (such as memory and loss), each one elaborates on them in new ways, offering different perspectives and developing themes that previous novels had left without a clear-cut definition. For this reason, how a particular subject is treated changes, sometimes radically, with each novel, making it somewhat difficult to trace a fully coherent thematic throughline for Ishiguro's entire production. To this we add the fact that his works simply don't easily lend themselves to categorization, since the author's *modus operandi* is to proceed for ideas rather than genre, as he states in his Nobel Prize interview:

I never really think much about genre. [...] I don't sit there thinking now I'll write a thriller or now I'll write a love story or a period thing. I have an idea and it is usually an idea that doesn't yet have a setting. [...] I never start off by saying I might do something that is a bit like a science fiction book or something like a detective story. I become desperate and I use whatever I can to express the particular idea and it is only when I finish that somebody might look at what I have written from the outside and say, oh that looks like a piece of fantasy or that looks like science fiction. For me [...] am like a crazy person trying to build a flying machine in my garage or in my back garden and I am just putting anything on that will make this thing fly (...)

This 'scavenger' approach to genre, where the author takes the elements he needs from a certain narrative tradition to develop his own idea without strictly adhering to that same tradition, has been at times heavily criticized. Ursula K. Le Guin, author and critic, stated in a blog post on *The Buried*

Giant titled “‘Are they going to say this is fantasy?’”: “No writer can successfully use the ‘surface elements’ of a literary genre — far less its profound capacities — for a serious purpose, while despising it to the point of fearing identification with it” (...). Nevertheless, I would argue that it’s precisely this eclectic capacity for using genre tropes as a ‘lens’ to focus more clearly on certain elements of a thematic core that makes Ishiguro’s novels so original and distinct from each other — especially in a world where genres like fantasy and sci-fi are rapidly approaching a critical mass of formulaic repetitions over the same tropes.

This tangent aside, the aim of this dissertation is twofold. The first is to offer a more comprehensive view of the subjects of trauma and childhood in Ishiguro’s novels, at least in those that have been selected for this analysis. As previously noted, literary analysis on these topics has been mostly relegated to individual novels; my hope is that this dissertation can prove to be a more systematic elaboration over these themes, even though it doesn’t cover the entirety of Ishiguro’s body of work. Second, I aim to provide a deeper analysis on the theme of childhood specifically when it comes to this author’s novels. As the reader might have noticed in these paragraphs, literary criticism regarding the theme of childhood is more sparse and less consistent compared to that about the theme of trauma when it comes to Ishiguro’s novels, at least as my findings seem to suggest. My aim is to flesh out literary analysis of this — apparently underrated — thematic aspect of Ishiguro’s novels with new insights. When it comes to childhood, there are several themes that reoccur throughout all of the novels examined in this dissertation which — as far as my research suggests — have gone unnoticed or haven’t been fully explored; the most prominent of these is how the adult characters tend to objectify children and childhood, something that will be explored more thoroughly in the dedicated chapters. The depth of these novels is such that literary criticism can keep finding new points of view, angles of analysis and ways to discuss them despite the immense amount of writing that has already been done over these novels. Ishiguro himself stated, in his Nobel Prize interview, that he has “one good idea every five years or something”, and the amount of time, effort and care put into these ideas is very much evident in how literary criticism keeps delving into them seemingly without ever reaching the bottom.

This chapter serves as an introduction to the rest of this dissertation. As the latter’s subject matter is twofold — trauma and childhood — it has also been divided into two parts. Each of them will provide a brief theoretical overview of the respective subject before delving into how such concepts apply to Ishiguro’s novels as a whole. More specific and in-depth discussion of each novel is reserved for their dedicated chapter.

DYNAMICS OF TRAUMA: ISHIGURO'S SELF-DECEIVING NARRATORS

The APA Dictionary of Psychology defines trauma as “any disturbing experience that results in significant fear, helplessness, dissociation, confusion, or other disruptive feelings intense enough to have a long-lasting negative effect on a person’s attitudes, behavior, and other aspects of functioning” (n.p.). While it is a rather broad definition, it allows us to focus on the aspects that are the most relevant to the novels at hand; namely, dissociation and confusion – two notions deeply tied to the theme of memory which is so central to Ishiguro’s novels.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud expounds his theory on trauma through the notion of nightmares, in particular those experienced by World War I veterans. These nightmares tended to repeat images from the soldiers’ war experience in a non-symbolic manner; Freud theorized that they were driven less by the desire for wish fulfilment than by a repetition compulsion, later posited as part of the “death drive”. Repetition compulsion drives the subject to subconsciously re-experience memories and feelings from the past leaving them blind to both the psychological process itself and the consequences (and the underlying meaning) of what is being repeated. There is an element of dissociation of experience from understanding, and of memory from consciousness, such that the individual cannot comprehend the event and becomes dispossessed of their own history. Notably, trauma does not consist of the event itself, but of the subject’s reaction to it, which comes only at a later time; this retroactivity breaks the conventional chronology of memory, as the past is re-created and projected into the future through repetition. Furthermore, as psychoanalyst Arnold Modell puts it, traumatic response is often accompanied by a loss, or “freezing”, of metaphor and more generally of symbolic representation to the point of “threaten[ing] the integrity of the self” (*Imagination and the Beautiful Brain*, p. 113). Since language is the most prevalent form of symbolic representation, trauma is often perceived as an unspeakable, foreign entity like a ghost possessing the subject’s body, only able to be witnessed (and re-witnessed through repetition) but not communicated. In reference to this, Donnel B. Stern (in ‘Shall the Twain Meet? Metaphor, Dissociation, and Cooccurrence’) notes that this disruption of metaphor brings with it a disruption of meaning, as the past remains fixed and evades any form of recontextualization in respect to the present. In order for trauma to be reflected on, and subsequently worked through, the metaphorical process of transference of memory to the present, where it can be reformed into an emotional category, needs to be reestablished. The presence of a (real or imaginary) listener to the experience is essential to mend the break in the empathic tie of the subject with themselves; literary discourse can fulfill that role and provide the necessary transitional space for this connection to be reestablished. Artistic representation is a way of repairing

metaphoric connection and working through trauma, turning a non-story into a story. Nevertheless, it's important to mention that, as Cimatti puts it, "meaning [...] is not contained within (like the "surprise" inside a chocolate egg) but in the following operation of "rewriting"[...]" (*La Fabbrica del Ricordo*, p. 121). That is, meaning is not to be extracted from the memory itself but constructed through symbolical narration. In a way, it is a similar process to traumatization, where an event is understood as traumatic only *ex-post*, but whereas trauma leads to the subject being dispossessed of their own history, reconstruction works in the opposite direction.

As previously stated, trauma causes a spatial and temporal displacement in the subject, who find themselves "stranded" in a specific point of their past, unable to move on. This causes a breakdown of the narrative of the self and memory as we commonly understand it, caused by a distortion in the perception of chronology brought upon by a portion of the past being 'extracted' from the rest. In part because of this, Freud was suspicious of our memory's capacity to register events objectively, and he claimed that "people often construct such things unconsciously – almost like works of fiction" ('Screen Memories', p. 315). He coined the term "screen memory", designating an early memory that replaces a later one or vice versa; the screened memory is often traumatic or otherwise disturbing in nature, and the screen is subconsciously deployed to make it more approachable. This happens most often with memories from childhood, which tend to be the most malleable. While the screen memory is different from the one being concealed, more often than not it resembles it in some way, thus hinting at a deeper meaning behind it. Nevertheless, its very existence serves as further proof of the gap that exists between past and memory, even more so if this past is viewed as traumatic; the screen memory simultaneously alleviates this paradox (as it "fills up" a part of our self-narrative that would otherwise remain unspeakable due to its traumatic nature) and exacerbates it (as it forces the subject to "inhabit a time before time" (Rabelhofer, 'Inhabiting a Time before Time. Freud's Concept of Trauma as a Psychoanalytical Figure of Thought') by distorting chronology in service of that self-narrative).

Memory is a central theme, if not *the* most central theme, in Ishiguro's novels. All of them are written from a first-person perspective (except for *The Buried Giant*, which nonetheless features chapters written from Sir Gawain's point of view) and many of them, most notably *The Remains of the Day* and *Never Let Me Go*, have the tone of a diary or memoir. It is therefore inevitable that trauma and its effects on memory find their way into these novels. Although the most prominent examples appear in *The Unconsoled* and *The Buried Giant*, instances occur in various forms across all the novels I will examine. In particular, Ishiguro seems to be interested in narratives of nostalgia and self-deception. Most of the Japan side of the plot in *A Pale View of Hills* is likely nothing but a fake screen memory created by Etsuko; *The Unconsoled* sees its protagonist firmly convinced that his

parents will come to see his performance when in the end that turns out to be nothing but wishful thinking; in *When We Were Orphans*, Banks believes the wounded Japanese soldier he finds in Shanghai to be his long lost friend Akira (not to mention that his quest of finding his parents decades after their disappearance is rather delusional); the entirety of *Never Let Me Go* is pervaded with a sense of longing and nostalgia for a place, Hailsham, ultimately based on a benevolent lie; and finally the journey of the two protagonists of *The Buried Giant* has its objective in the recovery of and reconciliation with a forgotten past. As it becomes clear from these examples, in accordance with the theories of Freud and the following literature on psychoanalysis, memory in Ishiguro is never objective, truthful or reliable in any capacity. Etsuko tells us as much in her narration in *A Pale View of Hills*:

Memory, I realize, can be an unreliable thing; often it is heavily coloured by the circumstances in which one remembers, and no doubt this applies to certain of the recollections I have gathered here. It is possible that my memory of these events will have grown hazy with time, that things did not happen in quite the way they come back to me today. (p. 159)

Ironically, Etsuko's confession of her own unreliability could be read as an attempt to make herself seem more reliable – perhaps less to the readers and more to herself. Although they diverge slightly from the traditional definition of the term, unreliable narrators are a common presence in Ishiguro's novels. The clearest example of this is *The Unconsoled*, in which the entire narration is steeped in unreal, dreamlike logic, but as mentioned before, *A Pale View of Hills* and *When We Were Orphans* also contain unreliable narrators.

The way unreliability and trauma are connected is through the notion of the screen memory, which is a form of positive self-deception. Whenever a traumatized subject makes use of this coping mechanism, they do so in (subconscious) service of a narrative that is comfortable to them and allows them to maintain coherency in their memory. In doing so, they inevitably turn into unreliable narrators of their own history. As we will see, this is explicitly the case for Etsuko in *A Pale View of Hills*, but *The Unconsoled* also presents this in a unique form where the surrounding characters themselves act as a screen for the protagonist to project himself onto. It needs to be remembered, however, that this screen is not fully opaque; hints of what lies underneath are always able to emerge in one form or another. In other words, the protagonists of Ishiguro's novels cannot outrun their subconscious, or rather their memory, as much as they try to; they slip and speak of it without realizing, allowing the reader to pierce the veil of self-deception. It is not a coincidence, then, that the climactic point of these novels so often comes when their protagonists are forced to confront their past as well, and see it for what it is. We see this in *The Unconsoled* when Ryder is told that his parents won't come to see

him, in *When We Were Orphans* when Banks is told about the (somewhat banal) truth of his parents' disappearance, and in *The Buried Giant* when Querig is slain and the amnesia-inducing fog is lifted allowing the sins of the past to emerge once more. This is not necessarily always the case, as Etsuko never quite seems to recognize the nature of Sachiko's story as a screen of her own, and the major revelations in the story of *Never Let Me Go* (such as the revelation of the clones' status) are mostly external rather than internal.

Nonetheless, the importance of memories (be they 'real' or screens) and the trauma they carry with them for these characters cannot be overstated. Save, perhaps, for Kathy in *Never Let Me Go* (though we do see this also in her friend Ruth), the protagonists of the novels under scrutiny here have in common an inability to move on from their past. They always come back to it, or search for it when it's missing (like Banks and the elderly couple of *The Buried Giant*), consciously or subconsciously – sometimes both. As victims of trauma, the only course of action seemingly available to them is going back to that point in time and/or space where the events that caused it occurred and acting it out in different forms until they can find a way of properly working through it. These attempts are not always successful; the ending of *The Unconsoled* shows that Ryder is still trapped in the same self-referential cycle metaphorically represented by how the tram he's riding is running in circles. Other times, like in *When We Were Orphans* and *The Buried Giant*, the protagonists do manage to eventually overcome and reconstruct their trauma (even if, like in Banks' case, the result is still partially based on self-deception).

Up until now, we have treated trauma as a concept pertaining to the psychology of the individual subject. Individual people, however, are not the only entities possessing the capacity for memory; societies do as well, through the passing of culture, tradition and official History. Therefore, it stands to reason that the mechanics of traumatization can also apply, with a few changes due to the difference between the workings of individual and collective memory, to an entire collectivity, be it a nation, culture, or a generation. In this case, the term "collective trauma" is used, along with its derivatives of "historical trauma" and "generational trauma".

In "Collective Trauma and the Social Construction of Meaning", Hirschberger defines collective trauma as "the psychological reactions to a traumatic event that affect an entire society". In the same manner as for individual trauma, collective trauma does not consist of the event itself but of the subject's (in this case, a collective subject) reaction to and re-elaboration of it. The tragic event that triggers this trauma is represented in collective memory not only mimetically but also as "an ongoing reconstruction of the trauma in an attempt to make sense of it" – in other words, a collective effort in rebuilding the self-narrative of the group. So far, the dynamics of individual and collective trauma

may seem almost perfectly equivalent, but we have to keep in mind the differences between how individual and collective memory function. Hirschberger, once again, gives a concise explanation:

Collective memory of trauma is different from individual memory because collective memory persists beyond the lives of the direct survivors of the events, and is remembered by group members that may be far removed from the traumatic events in time and space. These subsequent generations of trauma survivors, that never witnessed the actual events, may remember the events differently than the direct survivors, and then the construction of these past events may take different shape and form from generation to generation.

While, as mentioned before, individual memory is also far from objective, collective memory takes it a step further by being shared between multiple people, some (or even most) of whom were not direct witnesses of the event, and thus subject to the laws of consensus. The construction of this consensus equals to a construction of meaning, which in turn serves to forge a sense of continuity and connection between the self and the other; in other words, the construction of identity and belonging. While this is also true for individual trauma, something that separates it from collective trauma is that the latter's recognition from the community at large also forces members of the group responsible for the traumatic event to confront it – the age-old proverb of “the axe forgets, the tree remembers” doesn't quite apply in this case. This means that, after an initial phase of unspeakability, what the process of meaning construction entails is very different between victims and perpetrators.

For victim groups, this usually results in the passing down of cultural teachings that promote the preservation of the group in the face of existential threats. This in turn serves to increase group cohesion and amplify the sense of a collective, transgenerational self. “The profound sense of meaning that is borne out of collective trauma perpetuates the memory of the trauma and the reluctance to close the door on the past”, keeping it alive to the point it becomes a core component of the group's identity, a “lens through which group members understand their social environment” (Hirschberger, p. 2).

For perpetrator groups, on the other hand, collective trauma threatens identity “as it creates tension between the desire to view the group in a positive light, and the acknowledgment of severe moral transgressions in its past” (Hirschberger). This dissonance induces members of the group to try and distance themselves from past offences, creating a discontinuity in collective memory as this distancing sometimes involves attempts at minimizing, denying or disowning the traumatic event. More often, this process takes on a more nuanced form where the collective narrative of the event is built in such a way as to be more palatable to group members and reduce their perceived

responsibility. But if this isn't possible, if the dissonance between past actions and current values is too great, then disenfranchisement with the group itself is the only viable option.

It is worth noting that the two dynamics can and often do coexist within the same group when the latter assumes both roles in different yet related events; an example that is particularly relevant to the novels by Ishiguro that I will analyze is post-war Japan. Before and during World War II, imperial Japan was the perpetrator of several atrocities (such as the Nanjing Massacre in 1937-38 (Chang, *The Rape of Nanking*) and the "work" of Unit 731 in Manchukuo between 1933 and 1945 (Kristof)) in their conquered territories; at the same time, the traumatic effects of the nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki are undeniable and still felt to this day. This will be further elaborated on in the chapter dedicated to *A Pale View of Hills*, though it is worth mentioning that the consequences of received and inflicted trauma in post-war Japan are also a major theme of *An Artist of the Floating World*.

At a first glance, the novels at hand could be roughly divided into two categories depending on whether the trauma that is represented is individual or collective in nature. Of course, this is a rather simplistic classification given that each novel contains multiple instances of trauma other than that of the protagonists; furthermore, the two categories are sometimes muddled as collective trauma naturally affects the individual, and vice versa individual trauma can become a collective category when viewed through the lens of literature.

When We Were Orphans stands firmly on the side of representing individual trauma. While most of the story is set in the years preceding World War II, foreshadowing what is to come, at the core of the novel there is Banks' trauma as an orphan and the self-deceiving delusions that accompany it. Even when Shanghai is attacked by the Japanese, the search for his parents remains his sole preoccupation; this is stretched to the point of absurdity as he ventures in the middle of a war zone to enter a house his parents had last been seen entering decades before.

The Unconsoled is a mostly solipsist work, where the reader is never quite sure if what Ryder narrates is reality, dream or projection. The characters reflect different aspects of his psyche, and the use of dream logic makes any kind of point regarding the world outside the protagonist seemingly difficult if not outright impossible. However, there is still a sense that the unnamed Eastern European town the novel takes place in is in fact a community, as disenfranchised and downtrodden as it is. Said community is suffused with a sort of vague melancholy that unfolds differently for each character; there's not a clear-cut single source for the town's collective depression, but the inhabitants are secure in their belief that Ryder's exhibition will provide the solution. There is also the matter of

Max Sattler, a mysterious character of the town's history only described as a divisive figure of extremist views (as Matović notes in 'Collective Memory in Kazuo Ishiguro's Novel *The Unconsoled*', his name "points to a unique amalgam of references to Karl Marx, Joseph Stalin, and Adolph Hitler" (p. 195)); this figure's legacy is never directly confronted or engaged with, only mythicized, thus hinting at the city underlying, unresolved trauma. Thus, although the unnamed city "is interpreted as Ryder's *memoryscape*" ('Collective Memory', p. 193, emphasis in the original), it faces crises of values and collective trauma in the same way a "real" community would.

In *A Pale View of Hills*, Etsuko's personal trauma of her daughter's suicide and post-war Japan's collective trauma related to the atomic bombings are deeply, almost inextricably interconnected. Both events are narrated (or rather, *not* narrated) by Etsuko with a similar tendency to ellipsis: the bombings are only referenced three times throughout the novel, and Etsuko repeatedly states her unwillingness to talk about Keiko's suicide with Niki despite her claims of having grown accustomed to that metaphorical wound. Both traumas are rooted in a deep sense of survivor's guilt as well as an intense desire on the narrator's part to forget them and move on. But as mentioned before, unelaborated trauma persists in memory like a ghost (itself an important recurring image in the novel), indelible from memory yet at the same time impossible to properly narrate. The unsaid constitutes a major part of the novel's thematic core.

On the other hand, the story of *The Buried Giant* is primarily built around a case of collective trauma. Using the elements that the fantasy genre puts at his disposal, Ishiguro makes tangible this impulse to forget and inability to comprehend trauma through the mysterious amnesia-inducing mist emitted by the dragon Querig. This mist causes everyone to forget their past and, therefore, their traumas, both collective (namely the bloody war between Bretons and Saxons) and individual. It is quite clear that the mist symbolizes repression of trauma and the desire to forget and move on even as fragments of the past keep resurfacing through the veil of amnesia. When facing an unspeakable past that could bring disastrous consequences if brought to light once more, the individual has two choices, exemplified respectively by Sir Gawain and Wistan the Saxon warrior: leave it buried and repressed in its grave, or unearth it and bear the pain it could bring. As we will see in the dedicated chapter, the novel's resolution seems to hint at the latter being the healthier approach to recovery, aligning itself with the views of Freud and Stern. It's interesting to note how Sir Gawain and Wistan more or less correspond to the mechanisms of collective trauma in perpetrator and victim groups defined by Hirschberger: the former wants to keep Querig alive (and thus maintain the influence of the mist over Britain) because King Arthur's actions against the Saxons clash with the knight's image of him as a virtuous leader, undermining his group identity as a loyal follower, while the latter makes

his hatred for the Britons a core part of his identity and even attempts to transmit it to the next generation (represented by Edwin), with uncertain success.

Never Let Me Go is somewhat of a special case in that there is no single traumatic event that the novel's narrative can be traced back to; somewhat uncannily, not even the children's discovery of their status as clones seems to elicit a traumatic reaction. Rather, the novel is suffused with what Drag calls "an acute sense of loss" (*Revisiting Loss*, p. 166), namely the loss of Hailsham and the childhood it represents. As painful as this separation is, it does not seem to trigger a traumatic response in Kathy; she appears to approach her memories with clarity and control, and unlike most of Ishiguro's narrators she doesn't make use of self-deception or deflection in her recounting of her past. In fact, her nostalgia constitutes a fundamental part of her meaning-construction process: "Kathy's remembering is a complex process of reconstruction determined by her current perspective" (p. 177), says Drag. Rather than trauma, Kathy's psychological response to the loss of Hailsham could be more aptly described as mourning. That said, there are similarities between what Hailsham means to Kathy and the reconstruction process of victim groups of collective trauma. The school becomes a foundational part of her identity as well as that of the people of her past she reconnects with in the last part of her life, something capable of overcoming differences previously regarded as insurmountable; notably, this also extends to the donor in Kathy's care at the beginning of the novel, who wasn't a Hailsham student but nonetheless bonds with Kathy over memories of it. If one had to extract a traumatic reading out of *Never Let Me Go*, it could be said that the unspeakable event is the circumstances of the clones' birth themselves, and what the narrative reconstruction process entails for them is finding meaning in a life that would otherwise have none beyond their societally-dictated biological destiny of 'replacement parts' for 'real' human beings.

The result of this classification is more like a spectrum than a sum of two categories. Whenever individual and collective trauma are both part of the underlying narrative (which, as far as the examined novels are concerned, is the majority of cases) they appear to be inextricably linked to the point that they cannot be analyzed separately, whether it be because the narrator adopts the same coping strategy in regards to both (*A Pale View of Hills*), because they are tied together by concrete elements of the story (*The Buried Giant*), or because the community itself is a reflection of the protagonist's psyche (*The Unconsoled*). Whatever the case, what connects these novels together is the common thread of the dichotomy between remembering and forgetting and how their narrators struggle to navigate these two poles. Trauma has the effect of making the two opposites meet in a paradoxical clash where the event is at the same time carved indelibly into memory yet impossible to recall and integrate into a narrative of the self. Thus, the characters lie to themselves, either by

omission or subconsciously through the use of screen memories, in order to avoid facing a past that, to them, is too painful to speak of or simply indescribable. In other words, trauma represents a failure of memory and its representation.

It has not yet been noted how tightly the notion of trauma is connected to the concept of childhood - whose meaning and relevance in the novels under scrutiny in this dissertation will be discussed in what follows.

CHILDHOOD AND ITS CONSTRUCTIONS: CHILD THEORY AND ITS (IN?)APPLICABILITY TO ISHIGURO'S NOVELS

In *Childhood in the Contemporary English Novel*, Dinter lists *Never Let Me Go* among the novels for adults about childhood, a genre she describes as “booming” (p. 1). She remarks that, despite childhood being a frequent theme in the history of English (and other) literature, its position as the center of novels which treat it as a worthy subject in and of itself rather than in the context of the *Bildungsroman* is a remarkably recent phenomenon, possibly following the rise of issues such as class, gender, and postcolonialism in fiction. Moreover, their portrayal of children tends to diverge from the classical stereotype of naivete and innocence, pointing to “‘dark’ potentials within the child” (p. 3) as well as including marginalized or otherwise ‘different’ childhoods.

One of Dinter’s stated aims in *Childhood in the Contemporary English Novel* is “to demonstrate that [...] contemporary fiction increasingly conceives of childhood as a construct, rather than adhering to the notion of childhood as a natural and universal phase of life” (p. 8). The idea that childhood is artificial rather than biologically motivated originate from a study by Philippe Ariès titled *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* (original title *L'Enfant et la vie familiale sous l'ancien régime*). In particular, Dinter quotes a rather famous passage from this book:

In medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist; this is not to suggest that children were neglected, forsaken or despised. The idea of childhood is not to be confused with affection for children: it corresponds to an awareness of the particular nature of childhood, that particular nature which distinguishes the child from the adult, even the young adult. In medieval society this awareness was lacking. That is why, as soon as the child could live without the constant solicitude of his mother, his nanny or his cradle-rocker, he belonged to adult society. (p. 128)

In other words, the idea that children form a category distinct from adults even beyond their period of being physically dependent from their carers is more recent, presumably dating back to educational theorists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries such as Locke and Rousseau and successively supported by Romantic idealism, which “put forward an understanding of childhood as a special and transient phase of life that deserves attention and protection” (*Childhood in the Contemporary English Novel*, pp. 9-10). The constructivist approach was further reinforced and provided with stronger theoretical bases during the 1980s and 90s with studies such as Prout and James’ *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood*. The aim of this work was to construct a new framework for childhood studies through, among others, two maxims: that childhood is a construct that functions as a variable of social analysis that “can never be entirely divorced from other variables such as class, gender, or ethnicity” (p. 8) (and that therefore it is more appropriate to talk about “childhoods” in the plural); and that children are not merely “passive subjects of social structures and processes” but “must be seen as active in the construction and determination of their own social lives” which “are worthy of study in their own right, independent of the perspective and concerns of adults” in the same way any other social category would be. With their list of six analysis parameters Prout and James intended to criticize “previously hegemonic concepts” (p. 23) on childhood in both academic and “common” public discourse such as theories of socialization and development – an especially radical proposition given how development and childhood are practically synonymous in Western culture – which deny children their active role in the definition of their own social variable.

Dinter notes that this socio-constructivist approach is not the only existing one in opposition to essentialism, and that it has been criticized for relying on normative assumptions to define what children and childhood are despite its claims to regard childhood as a social construct. Poststructuralism, on the other hand, takes the constructivist notion even further by stating that, in short, there is no such thing as a ‘real’ child, and that the idea of ‘child’ is itself no less of a construct than the idea of ‘childhood’. Two representatives of this approach are Lesnik-Oberstein and Thomson, who, in the article ‘What is Queer Theory Doing with the Child?’, state:

The child too, then, may be understood as a figure which is the product of a given history and culture, and emerges from competing ideologies of class, ethnicity, nationality, and so on. This approach may be seen as analogous to (de-)constructivist arguments already more well-established in gender studies, post-colonial theory, and queer theory. Meanwhile the child also maintains a centripetal force as an occasion of pathos and of, moreover - and therefore?

- an anti-theoretical moment, resistant to analysis, itself the figure deployed as resistance. The child as a figure that operates through repetition, and therefore as the repeating figure, is made to found the ‘real’ beyond language as the always retrievable already-there. Certainly this is - still -

the understanding of the child that prevails in all of children's literature criticism (by its own definition), and in much of literary criticism and history. (p. 2)

In short, what the two critics are saying here is that although the idea that all categories are a product of language has been long accepted in fields of study on gender, post-colonialism and queer theory, the same has not happened in childhood studies and literary criticism of novels about childhood. Literary discourse and literature itself, while inclined towards constructivism, are prone to falling into the same essentialist contradictions identified by Lesnik-Oberstein and Thomson. To this regard, Dinter says that "contemporary English novels oscillate between an acknowledgement of constructivism on one hand and an endorsement of childhood as the last irrevocable quintessence of humanity on the other" (p. 14). Nevertheless, she also underlines the importance of literature "as an interdiscourse mediating between highly specialized scholarly discourses and basic everyday language" (p. 15) and how novels can act as a mediator for constructivist paradigms to spread into a 'common' discourse still steeped in essentialist ideas.

What makes it difficult to conceive of childhood as a fully constructed identity is that, while concepts such as gender or race presuppose an alterity, childhood is considered universal for the simple reason that every adult has been a child once. As a supposedly universal experience, childhood is thought as directly accessible without mediation and therefore used as the foundation of 'common sense' ideas. These ideas entail a conception of childhood as the quintessential 'natural' state where the human being is at their most innocent and fragile, and therefore in need of special care and protection – and consequently, childhood itself is an exceptional state of being that needs to be preserved. The idea that the very existence of childhood is at risk goes at least as far back as Postman's *The Disappearance of Childhood* (1982), something which – in short – he attributes to the homogenization of media for adults and for children and the consequent impossibility by the former to protect the latter from the 'adult secrets' of violence and sex. It is also worth noting that the essentialist notion of childhood innocence assumes political connotations as well, especially regarding the subject of migrant children – something that will be relevant in the following discussion on *A Pale View of Hills* and *When We Were Orphans*.

The contemporary novel can, and often does, criticize traditional ideas about childhood as well as the difficulties inherent in its representation. In *Elusive Childhood: Impossible Representations in Modern Fiction*, Honeyman posits that childhood, as a form of alterity, is characterized by an impossibility of thorough and accurate representation: "In fictively and academically representing the social, subjective position of those we call children, even the illusion of an inter-subjective link between adult writer and child is impossible" (p. 4). Dinter notes that this phenomenon "applies not

only to childhood but also any literary work that constructs characters and narrators: fictional child characters and their narrative voices are no more or less constructed than, say, those of an elderly fictional person, a character of the opposite sex or of a bygone historical era” (*Childhood in the Contemporary English Novel*, p. 11). The common nature of childhood and other categories as social constructs that are not universal is thus further reinforced, and according to Honeyman contemporary novelists are increasingly aware of this:

The project of this book is to investigate various means of negotiating the inaccessibility of childhood in literary representations by writers self-conscious of the ‘impossibility’ of the task. It follows in two parts: first, a demonstration of techniques that authors have used in attempting to overcome the obstacle of representing the absent ‘child’; second, analyses of thematic reversals that authors use to decenter traditional constructions of childhood (often only to recenter them, placing one hypothesis for a seemingly fairer one), ultimately to throw the entire authority of adult discourse into question. (*Elusive Childhood*, p. 21)

The contemporary novel employs these techniques to explicate the “critical distance” (*Childhood in the Contemporary English Novel*, p. 12) between the adult author and the child narrator (for example through external focalization). The contemporary novel therefore purposefully highlights both the way it represents childhood and the theoretical and philosophical foundations of said representation, taking into consideration its own limits and potential when it comes to creating such discourse on this subject matter.

Though the main subject of *Elusive Childhood* is the American novel, the point Honeyman makes about modern fiction’s increasing self-awareness of its role in the construction of discourse surrounding childhood is also relevant for the British contemporary novel. In the article ‘Examining the Idea of Childhood: The Child in the Contemporary British Novel’, Dodou states:

What is particular about contemporary fiction is the prevalence of the aim to scrutinize the idea that the child is inherently innocent and that this innocence is precious and worth protecting. Responding to recent discussions regarding the treatment of ‘the child’ in society as well as in literary artefacts, novelists have challenged the sentimentalization of childhood. (p. 239)

Similarly to Honeyman, Dodou underlines how the novel fully recognizes its own role in the production of narratives and ideas about childhood, and consequently a sort of responsibility to reexamine those constructions that are widely accepted as part of the so-called ‘common sense’. In particular, Dodou calls attention to how the contemporary novel often aims to criticize adult preconceptions on childhood innocence, for example through a process she calls “Gothicizing the

child” (p. 240) – that is, portraying them as having ‘dark’ impulses usually attributed exclusively to adults (such as being manipulative, violent, or sexual). Dodou also mentions, but without elaborating further, how this tendency is “to some extent the result of academic discussions which focus on the adult interests that underlie the definition and representation of children and childhood” (p. 243). On the other hand, as previously seen with the debate between socio-constructivists and poststructuralists, these academic discussions are far from agreeing over the extent to which children and childhood can be considered a social construct. Whatever the case, subverting the classical view of the innocent, ‘natural’ child as well as portraying ‘abnormal’ childhoods is a common trend in the contemporary novel regardless of where the single work positions itself on the constructivist spectrum; Dinter cites, as examples, *The Wasp Factory* by Banks (1984), *Boy A* by Trigell (2004), and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* by Haddon (2003) (p. 3).

That said, the image of the child in Ishiguro’s novels doesn’t seem to follow this pattern of “Gothicization”, at least for the most part. In most cases, the child in Ishiguro serves as a representation of time, either the past (be it traumatic like in *The Unconsoled*, nostalgic like in *Never Let Me Go*, or both like in *When We Were Orphans*) or the future (like in *The Buried Giant* and, more obliquely, *A Pale View of Hills*). At first glance, this view seems to put Ishiguro in the field of the more classical and essentialist-leaning representations of childhood, since ‘children as the hope for the future’ and ‘childhood as a special and fragile phase of life all adults look back to’ are both widely-spread, ‘common sense’ paradigms when it comes to what childhood and children mean. It is not so simple, however. Not only is the future these children represent uncertain at best, but the nostalgic childhood that the protagonists of these novels try to reach back for (whenever they’re not actively avoiding it, that is) is part of their self-deluding fabrication (like in *When We Were Orphans*) or an attempt at the construction of an identity by dredging a past that is long dead and gone (like in *Never Let Me Go*). As Wong notes in a comparative analysis, their attempts at undoing the loss of their childhood brings distressing revelations which “shake the very foundations of their pleasant but fictional memories of childhood” and forces them to face the fact that “there is no comfortable retreat into the past” (*Kazuo Ishiguro*, pp. 83-85). There is no way for the adult self and the child self; the two are irrevocably separated as the link of memory stops functioning as it is normally understood. It is impossible for the adult to think about childhood without projecting their own wishes and fear onto it; the idea of childhood as a universal shared experience loses meaning as its memories are inevitably viewed through the lens of the present adult self. This brings Ishiguro’s novels closer to Honeyman’s theories on the “elusive childhood” by tying the impossibility of the adult narrator to reliably narrate childhood to the mercurial nature of human memory.

However, this does not mean that for Ishiguro the concept of childhood is in itself completely devoid of value. As with time and memory, childhood is inevitably linked to the concept of nostalgia, most of all in *When We Were Orphans* and *Never Let Me Go*. What this longing to return to an idealized past entails is different from novel to novel as the perspective of the author seems to gradually shift. To this regard, Drag notes:

Veering between escapism and a regressive, naïve idealisation of the past, on the one hand, and an idealistic longing to reconnect with one's place of origin, on the other, nostalgia is shown to span a broad spectrum of human activity. [...] Surveying Ishiguro's entire literary output, one can discern a growing appreciation of the role of nostalgic longing – from a scepticism manifest in Ono's and Stevens's attempts at deluded self-enhancement to a subtle endorsement of Kathy's desire to seek shelter in her "sanctuary of meaning." (*Revisiting Loss*, p. 186)

While the object of the narrators' nostalgia in *An Artist of the Floating World* and *The Remains of the Day* is not childhood, they are moved by the same desire as those of *When We Were Orphans* and *Never Let Me Go*, namely the longing to recover a past that is now irredeemably lost. This sense of loss, Drag says in his work, permeates Ishiguro's entire body of work, and while his analysis stops at *Never Let Me Go*, it is also very clearly true for Ishiguro's two latest novels. But even though childhood might be lost and inaccessible, it does not mean it is irrelevant: "it could be argued that even though nostalgia does not offer Banks or Kathy a way out of their predicaments, it does enable them to identify and define their disenchantment with the present" (*Revisiting Loss*, p. 186), says Drag. Nostalgia for one's childhood is not inherently good or bad, as it merely provides framing for how one can cope with present circumstances: like for Banks, it can feed into one's self-illusion, but it can also represent a way to accept the loss of said past, like for Kathy. Even though she often embellishes her time at Hailsham, and even though her childhood is, itself, artificial (as part of a bioethics experiment), Kathy still holds it as the foundation of her identity and values. Extrapolating it to a more general sense, it could be argued that this represents a reconstruction of a concept of childhood that has been deconstructed through the process of constructivism: childhood may be an artificial idea, a category used by adult society to encapsulate a portion of the human experience and elevate it to universal status, but, as the period in life where our values, our sociality, our personality are shaped, it stands at the core of who we are as human beings. This idea, present as a seed in *When We Were Orphans* and expanded upon in *Never Let Me Go*, is brought to a more general status in *Klara and the Sun*:

Mr Capaldi believed there was nothing special inside Josie that couldn't be continued. He told the Mother he'd searched and searched and found nothing like that. But I believe now he was

searching in the wrong place. There was something very special, but it wasn't inside Josie. It was inside those who loved her. (p. 306)

Here, it is not just one facet of life that is relativized, but one's entire identity. Nothing about who we are is innate; everything that defines us is a product of how our social environment perceives us and how we interact with that perception. It stands to reason, then, that the labels of 'child' and 'adult', as part of the definition of an individual's social position, must be constructed as well. It would appear, therefore, that *Klara and the Sun* (which, at the time of writing, is the latest work by Ishiguro) veers much more closely to the poststructuralist side of defining childhood. That said, *Never Let Me Go* and *Klara and the Sun* are somewhat of an exception, as the other novels don't seem to be interested in providing a definition of what childhood is in a general sense, but only in terms of how it determines the characters' worldview and informs their narration.

Overall, it is somewhat difficult to tell where Ishiguro's works position themselves regarding the constructivist debate on childhood, in part because, as it often happens with great authors, the view changes slightly with each work, like a mirror being adjusted to reflect the same object from different angles. As we've seen, such views change from a vaguely essentialist identification of the child with nostalgia for the past and hope for the future, to a reconstruction of the constructivist paradigm in *Never Let Me Go*, to a full-blown 'outsourcing of identity' in *Klara and the Sun*.

Another reason is that, as an author, Ishiguro seems less interested in wide-encompassing theoretical questions and more in focusing on certain aspects of the human experience, most prominently memory and its associated concepts of nostalgia, trauma and loss, and utilizing the tropes of a certain genre (like detective fiction in *When We Were Orphans*, or fantasy in *The Buried Giant*) to analyze them. This does not mean that his works only pertain to the realm of individual experience – as we've seen, all his novels deal with collective as well as individual trauma, or the subject's experience relates in some way to wider social issues – but it does mean that raw philosophy always takes a backseat compared to the human element of the story that is being told. In an interview with Wong, Ishiguro has this to say regarding the historical matter in his novels:

I don't think [truth] is anything as specific as factual truth of the sort that historians might be after [...]; it's just one person saying, "Here's a certain way of looking at human emotional experience. Doesn't this accord with your view of human experience?" It's appealing to other people's sense of the truth: "Doesn't it look this way to you, too? Doesn't it feel this way to you, too?" And, I suppose if you're trying to say something slightly different or slightly new, then what you're saying is, "Perhaps you've never looked at it this way, but now that I've put things this way, don't you recognize this, too?" It's an appeal to truth in that sense; it's not bringing evidence to the table

saying, "Here are all these bits of evidence, so this must inescapably adapt to this conclusion." It's not that kind of scientific truth or even social scientific truth. As far as I'm concerned, it's more an appeal for companionship in experiencing life.

In a more recent interview for *The Guardian* (2025), the author further expands upon this idea, also adding a few concerns motivated by contemporary historical circumstances:

[...] a novelist can provide the emotional dimension; we offer some sort of emotional truth that is not there in nonfiction, however scrupulously well researched and documented. [...] The whole status of what might be true has got very blurred lately. And so I feel that this power to actually cause emotions in people and create apparent emotional truths, is quite an odd thing.

Ultimately, this is a reaffirmation of a fundamental difference between the novel and sociology and philosophy; while they share a common goal in searching for the truth, what qualifies as such in the eyes of the novelist is something that resonates with the reader not only intellectually but emotionally as well. Thus, to the novelist, a theoretical question such as “is childhood real, or a social fabrication?” only matters insofar as the human element is involved. This isn’t to say that theoretical discussions on the nature of childhood are irrelevant to Ishiguro – as we’ve seen, they had a massive influence on how the contemporary English novel depicts its children and childhood as a whole, something that can be seen in the trajectory of Ishiguro’s works. However, one must not forget that the author’s aim is not to discuss or exposit sociological theories, but to reflect on certain aspects of the human experience, both individual and collective, through the exploration of characters – in other words, to tell a story.

A concept that hasn’t been touched upon yet and which is closely related to childhood is that of family – or rather, as it applies to the novels being examined, the lack thereof. The protagonists of these novels find themselves in a state of familial loss – either as a parent losing their child, or a child being orphaned in some way (or, in the case of Ryder, both at the same time). Children in Ishiguro are, without fail, orphans in one way or another: orphans of their parents, whether by disappearance (*When We Were Orphans*) or abandonment (*The Unconsoled*, *The Buried Giant*), orphans of their homeland (*A Pale View of Hills*, *When We Were Orphans*) or simply orphans by their very nature (*Never Let Me Go*). Accordingly, what this orphanhood means varies from novel to novel, but it always relates back to that sense of loss that Drag defines as omnipresent in Ishiguro’s works. Orphanhood implies, first of all, the severing of one’s relationship with their own roots; in Ishiguro’s novels, this activates in the narrators a process of yearning for such roots, which is expressed in many different ways as I have argued elsewhere. Interestingly, this marks a point in common between the

condition of the orphan and that of the migrant, two categories that intersect explicitly in *A Pale View of Hills* and *When We Were Orphans* and implicitly in *Never Let Me Go* (as the clones' status of 'disposable bodies' mirrors that of marginalized groups, and the erasure of the only home they have ever known, Hailsham, leads to a life where they are perpetually unable to settle down). Banks in particular is treated by his 'rescuer' Chamberlain as "something *unstable*, poised between affect and abjection" and with an "anxious ambivalence over whether Banks is a potentially foreign abandoned child or essentially British" ('Ishiguro and the Abandoned Child', p. 158, emphasis in original). Dean also notes that "the abandoned child is not a blank for easy adoption into a "home" culture" (p. 158), a discrepancy that is made visible in Keiko's suicide as it epitomizes the trauma inherent to migration.

This interplay between the status of the orphan and that of the migrant assumes political connotations, since the treatment of children and immigration policy are especially prominent issues in the political climate of Britain from the 1980s onwards, which is when the examined novels were conceived. This will be examined more closely in the chapters dedicated to *A Pale View of Hills* and *When We Were Orphans*. For now, suffice it to remark with Dean that:

A migrant or transnational child always threatens to become a citizen of the world, a citizen of nowhere, haunting Britain's confused attitudes towards cosmopolitanism, migration, and race in its post-Empire and increasingly neoliberal era from the early 1980s to the mid 2010s. (*Killing Children in British Fiction*, p. 175)

The title of the chapter this quote is taken from is "Children of Nowhere", paraphrasing a quote from a speech delivered by Prime Minister Theresa May in 2016. "Child of nowhere" is indeed a very apt description for the figure of the orphan-migrant. The loss of one's roots, be they biological or national, is tied to a loss of identity, something that, as seen in *Never Let Me Go*, can only be salvaged through the thread of memory.

The representation of children in Ishiguro's novels is quite complex. As representatives of a past obfuscated by the subconsciously fallible nature of memory and of a future that is, at best, inscrutable, children are almost mercurial figures that tend to escape strict definitions. Their condition as orphans marks the separation between childhood and the world of adults and how the latter cannot reconnect with the former in an easy, unproblematic way, thus influencing its literary representations. This connects Ishiguro to the contemporary discourse on the sociology of childhood, but it is important to remember that said discourse is only a means to the end of exploring human experience. As we will see in the next chapter, children are a fundamental part of this even in their absence.

CHAPTER 2:

A PALE VIEW OF HILLS: REPRESSING THE PAST AND KILLING THE FUTURE

A Pale View of Hills, published in 1982, represents Ishiguro's debut as a novelist. The narrative unfolds across two settings, as the plot revolves around Etsuko, a Japanese woman living England in the 1980s, as she reflects on her experiences in post-war Nagasaki. These recollections are prompted by the visit of her daughter Niki, occurring shortly after the suicide of Etsuko's elder daughter, Keiko. The story is mostly told through flashbacks; Etsuko's recounting of her life in Nagasaki is highly fragmented, centered on the year leading up to Keiko's birth and featuring a handful of characters close to her such as her first husband Jiro and her father-in-law Ogata. Perhaps the most significant of these characters, however, are Etsuko's neighbour Sachiko and her troubled daughter Mariko; the former wants to leave Nagasaki in pursuit of a better life in America, an aspiration that proves upsetting to her daughter. Clearly, Sachiko's story closely mirrors Etsuko's – to such an extent that the reader remains uncertain as to whether it is real or just a projection of Etsuko's own experience. This ambiguity culminates in the most climactic and famous scene in the book, in which Etsuko finds Mariko after the latter's flight:

"In any case," I went on, "if you don't like it over there, we can always come back."

This time she looked up at me questioningly.

"Yes, I promise," I said. "If you don't like it over there, we'll come straight back. But we have to try and see if we like it there. I'm sure we will."

The little girl was watching me closely. "Why are you holding that?" she asked.

"This? It just caught around my sandal, that's all."

"Why are you holding it?"

"I told you. It caught around my foot. What's wrong with you?" I gave a short laugh. "Why are you looking at me like that? I'm not going to hurt you." (p. 173)

Here, Etsuko is talking as if she is Mariko's mother ("If you don't like it over there, *we'll* come straight back"), making it abundantly clear how, regardless of whether Sachiko's story is real or not, she's using it as a screen memory to mask her own sense of guilt over Keiko's death. As Beedham

notes, “this slip of the pronouns is the point where the narrative reveals itself” and Etsuko and Sachiko become “indistinguishable” (*The Novels of Kazuo Ishiguro*, pp. 15-16). The link between this scene and Keiko’s suicide is symbolized by the piece of rope (as she killed herself by hanging) that becomes entangled around Etsuko’s foot. Significantly, Mariko appears to notice it only when Etsuko alludes to the possibility of her own dissatisfaction with life abroad (to this regard, the use of “over there” is interesting as its vagueness reinforces the identification of Etsuko and Sachiko’s stories by collapsing England and America into the same nebulously-defined ‘elsewhere’). According to Lewis, the image of the rope “literally binds together several different strands” (*Contemporary World Writers*, p. 35) of the novel such as Etsuko’s survivor’s guilt, Sachiko’s lack of concern about her daughter, Keiko’s suicide and Etsuko’s recurrent dream of a girl on a swing.

Guilt, and the traumatic response surrounding it, constitutes the focal point of *A Pale View of Hills*. As Drag notes, “Etsuko’s narrative motivation is marked by a profound ambivalence towards the past to which she turns. Throughout the novel she oscillates between a desire to confront the memories that continue to haunt her and a wish to suppress them altogether” (*Revisiting Loss*, p. 89). While the novel is essentially framed as a confession to her daughter Niki, Etsuko’s narration is full of inconsistencies, omissions and glossing over vital facts of her past – chief among which the effects of the atomic bomb on her life. Nevertheless, these ‘elephants in the room’ re-emerge through slippages (such as the previously discussed “we”) and the several ghostlike images that haunt her memories like that of the Tokyo woman drowning her own baby in the river. Accordingly, the tone of Etsuko’s narration is reserved, jarringly calm despite the traumatic experiences it is supposed to represent; Lewis sees the novel as part of what he calls a “literature of innuendo”, a form born out of a desire to “speak the unspeakable” (p. 42) which is counterbalanced by a fear of improper representation due to the inadequacy of language in the face of tragedies that defy understanding and are only able to leave impressions rather than descriptions. Therefore, *A Pale View of Hills* can be described as a narrative by and of omission, the true core of which can be found in what is left unsaid.

Accordingly, Etsuko never reveals the extent of what she suffered as a result of the atomic bomb. In fact, the latter is scarcely mentioned throughout the novel – only three times – and, when it does surface, it is rendered in a dispassionate, matter-of-fact tone that borders on the eerie (“My husband and I lived in an area to the east of the city [...] I was once told that before the war a small village had grown up on the riverbank. But then the bomb had fallen and afterwards all that remained were charred ruins” (p.11)). The true effects that this tragedy had on Etsuko must be inferred from a few vague and scattered allusions about her past. Apparently, most of her closest relatives, including her fiancé, died in the blast, and she was subsequently taken in by Ogata, her future father-in-law. Many

years later, when she asks him about her own behavior at that time, Ogata replies that she looked “very shocked” (p. 58) and says that she had developed the habit of playing the violin “in the dead of night” (p. 57). How long it took for her to recover from the initial shock remains a mystery, since her narration completely ignores that stage of her life, focusing exclusively on the reconstruction years instead. Needless to say, her silence on what constitutes the most significant event of her life is strikingly conspicuous and hints at an inner wound that has long cicatrized but has never fully healed. The only fitting representation for Etsuko’s loss is the “expanse of wasteground” that surround her neighborhood, reduced to little more than “charred ruins” – an image that evokes desolation and silence.

Etsuko’s behavior and propensity for ellipsis matches, at least in part, that of real survivors of the atomic bombings. One of the first and most important studies in this regard is *Death in Life: Survivors of Hiroshima* (1968) by the American psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton. He noted that the peculiarities of this tragedy (namely its suddenness and the fear of prolonged exposure to radiation) left the *hibakusha* (the Japanese name for the survivors of the nuclear tragedy) with what he called a “death imprint” (p. 480) which primarily manifested as an intense sense of guilt – namely, the feeling that their life was “purchased at the cost of another’s” (p. 489). In the novel, this imprint manifests mainly through the figure of Keiko; as we will see later, the collective trauma of the Nagasaki bombing and the personal trauma of Keiko’s suicide are deeply interconnected on a symbolic level. Lifton also notes that other common symptoms of post-atomic trauma are the suppression of feeling as a coping mechanism as well as “impaired formulation” (p. 528), that is, the inability to narrate one’s experiences in a coherent and satisfactory manner. The subdued, understated tone of Etsuko’s narration certainly seems to fit this mold, as she tries to emotionally distance herself from both the nuclear tragedy and her daughter’s suicide by adopting a dispassionate attitude towards her trauma and avoiding any mention of it whenever possible.

Another possibility is to interpret Etsuko’s silence as a response to what Levi called the “submerged, the complete witnesses” (*I sommersi e i salvati*, p. 61, my translation). Levi stated that the “true” witnesses of genocide are only those that could not survive, or that have been rendered mute by the ordeal. Therefore, Etsuko’s refusal to testify could be seen as surrendering to the impossibility of truthfully recounting the tragedy that the country went through. This interpretation would be corroborated by her reaction to the official peace memorial in Nagasaki:

It was always my feeling that the statue had a rather cumbersome appearance, and I was never able to associate it with what had occurred that day the bomb had fallen, and those terrible days

which followed. Seen from a distance, the figure looked almost comical, resembling a policeman conducting traffic. (pp. 137-138)

Just as the statue fails in its purpose to memorialize the tragedy (generating a comic effect instead), so too words fail to provide an accurate narrative – therefore, silence is preferable. Arguably, the truth is somewhere in the middle; while it is true that an event of this scale cannot be fully expressed through language without being reductive in one way or another, it is also possible that Etsuko uses this irrepresentability as a shield to avoid facing reality. Etsuko does seem “highly adept at coping with that inner wound” (*Revisiting Loss*, p. 93); she lies to herself constantly in ways that are very convincing for the reader, at least until the façade breaks down in that fateful scene that was described at the beginning of the chapter.

Furthermore, the way this self-deception is perpetuated differs markedly between Etsuko’s atomic trauma and the personal trauma of Keiko’s suicide, though certain similarities remain. Whereas the former is met with silence and avoidance, the latter is dealt with through projection and more or less veiled attempts by the narrator to persuade herself that she has long since overcome her trauma and that she is not to blame for Keiko’s act. She also seems to be more open to talk about Keiko’s death compared to the atomic bombing:

I have found myself continually bringing to mind that picture – of my daughter hanging in her room for days on end. The horror of that image has never diminished, but it has long ceased to be a morbid matter; as with a wound on one’s own body, it is possible to develop an intimacy with the most disturbing of things. (p. 54)

Here, Etsuko claims to have made peace with her daughter’s extreme act. The use of the word “wound” is quite interesting: not only it is the original meaning of the word ‘trauma’ in ancient Greek (Merriam-Webster Dictionary), but the motif of the wound will be reprised in *The Unconsoled*, namely in the character of Brodsky. Arguably, this word choice marks a point of contact between the two novels. Brodsky’s wound represents a source of comfort for him: he tends to it, caresses it repeatedly (it’s unclear whether to help or hinder its healing), and even treats it like an “old friend” (*The Unconsoled*, p. 313). As we will see in the chapter dedicated to that novel, Brodsky’s habit represents a masochistic fixation over a lost object, and functions as a metaphor of repetition compulsion. On her part, Etsuko claims to have developed a similar level of familiarity with her own trauma, that “it has long ceased to be a morbid matter”, but the omissions in her narration make it clear that this could not be further from the truth. Keiko’s death continues to haunt her and her surviving daughter Niki, with whom she has a tacit agreement not to discuss about the tragedy.

Nonetheless, Etsuko's repressed guilt (as well as her post-atomic trauma) emerges through what Drag calls "the ghostly dimension of the novel" (*Revisiting Loss*, p. 100). The image of the ghost, as something that is long dead and comes back to torment the living, is an extremely apt representation of the lingering effects of unaddressed trauma. While the ghosts in *A Pale View of Hills* aren't actual supernatural entities, they function as what Lewis calls "phantoms of memory" (*Kazuo Ishiguro*, p. 32). The first of these ghostly figures is, naturally, Keiko herself. Not only does she seem to haunt Etsuko's house through strange sounds that echo at night and "a strange spell" felt in the girl's room, "grown all the stronger now that Keiko was dead" (p. 53). The girl also appears in her mother's dreams. One night after Niki's visit, Etsuko dreams about a little girl playing on a swing; her daughter suggests that the little girl represents Keiko - something that Etsuko dismisses outright, saying that "it was just a little girl [she] knew once," (p. 95), most likely referring to Mariko. However, if, as it can be inferred from the scene that was analyzed at the beginning of this chapter, Mariko essentially functions as a 'double' of Keiko (or more accurately as her projection), then Etsuko's dismissal ironically reinforces the idea that the girl in her dream is, in fact, her dead daughter. Furthermore, the fact that the child is on a swing hints at the dream being a displaced image of Keiko hanging in her room. Despite her claims of having made peace with her daughter's suicide, Etsuko is unable to remove that image from her memory and is only able to cope by subconsciously replacing it with something more acceptable. While this marks a difference from her treatment of her post-atomic trauma (which is fully repressed rather than displaced), both are rooted in an inability to face the truth, whether by a lack of tools to properly express it or a refusal to accept her own sense of guilt.

This guilt emerges more clearly through the second ghost of the narrative, the woman "from across the river" (p. 19). While talking about her experience in Tokyo during the war, Sachiko tells Etsuko about a horrific scene she and her daughter Mariko happened to witness one day:

"You see Mariko went running off one morning. [...] Mariko ran down an alleyway, and I followed after her. There was a canal at the end and the woman was kneeling there, up to her elbows in water. A young woman, very thin. I knew something was wrong as soon as I saw her. You see, Etsuko, she turned round and smiled at Mariko. I knew something was wrong and Mariko must have done too because she stopped running. At first I thought the woman was blind, she had that kind of look, her eyes didn't seem to actually see anything. Well, she brought her arms out of the canal and showed us what she'd been holding under the water. It was a baby."

[...]

"[Mariko] saw everything? She saw the baby?"

"Yes. Actually, for a long time I thought she hadn't understood what she'd seen. She didn't talk about it afterwards. She didn't even seem particularly upset at the time. She didn't start talking

about it until a month or so later. We were sleeping in this old building then. I woke up in the night and saw Mariko sitting up, staring at the doorway. [...] I asked Mariko what was wrong and she said a woman had been standing there watching us. I asked what sort of woman and Mariko said it was the one we'd seen that morning. Watching us from the doorway [...]" (pp. 74-75)

The significance of this character, I would argue, is twofold. On the one hand, she functions as a poignant image of the trauma that Japan suffered after World War II. As noted by Takeshima in the article 'Long-Term Impact of World War II on Suicide in Japan', the country saw a massive spike in suicide rates during the 1950s, especially among the younger generations, "who were educated in a militaristic and paternalistic framework, experiencing the loss of that framework suddenly" (p. 3). As was stated in the previous chapter, sudden decay of group identity is a common symptom of collective trauma, especially in perpetrator groups who are forced to face a disillusionment with previously held moral values. Another common response is further entrenchment in those values and the denial of any evidence that would prove them wrong; this is a common theme in Ishiguro's early novels, chiefly *An Artist of the Floating World* and *The Remains of the Day*. In *A Pale View of Hills*, this stance is exemplified by Etsuko's father-in-law, Ogata, who argues that "we lost the war because we didn't have enough guns and tanks, not because our people were cowardly, not because our society was shallow" (p. 147). The fact that the Tokyo woman looks like she's blind might be symbolic of an inability and/or unwillingness to see her own actions in the present and to look to the future.

This ties to the second level of meaning of this figure, who I argue represents yet another 'double' of Etsuko's alongside Sachiko. During her narration, the reader is left with an increasing suspicion that Etsuko is using Sachiko's story to make herself look like a dutiful mother, until the illusion comes crashing down near the end with that "we can always come back" (although Etsuko herself never seems to realize it). From Etsuko's testimony, Sachiko appears to be quite the neglectful parent, allowing Mariko to skip school and ignoring her daughter's concerns about leaving Japan; meanwhile, Etsuko states that her "motives for leaving Japan were justifiable" and that she "always kept Keiko's interests very much at heart" (p. 91). Once the illusion dissolves for the reader, it becomes clear that Sachiko *is* Etsuko, on some level, regardless of whether her story is real or not, and that the latter is projecting her guilt onto someone else to avoid acknowledging it.

The way Etsuko, Sachiko and the Tokyo woman are connected is, in my interpretation, through a scene immediately preceding the "we can always come back" scene. Against her mother's wishes, Mariko took in some stray kittens, and her desire to keep taking care of them becomes a major obstacle in Sachiko's plans to move to the US. Eventually, Sachiko's irritation reaches a breaking

point. She calls them “filthy little animals” (p. 165) before going to get rid of them by drowning them in a nearby river:

Sachiko was gazing down into the vegetable box through the wire gauze. She slid open a panel, brought out a kitten and shut the box again. She held the kitten in both hands, looked at it for a few seconds, then glanced up at me. “It’s just an animal, Etsuko,” she said. “That’s all it is.” She put the kitten into the water and held it there. She remained like that for some moments, staring into the water, both hands beneath the surface. [...] Then for the first time, without taking her hands from the water, Sachiko threw a glance over her shoulder towards her daughter. Instinctively, I followed her glance, and for one brief moment the two of us were both staring back up at Mariko. The little girl was standing at the top of the slope, watching with the same blank expression.

[...] “It’s still alive,” [Sachiko] said, tiredly. Then she turned to me and said: “Look at this water, Etsuko. It’s so dirty.” With an air of disgust, she dropped the soaked kitten back into the box and shut it. “How these things struggle,” she muttered, and held up her wrists to show me the scratch-marks. [...] Sachiko adjusted her position then pushed the vegetable box over the edge of the bank; the box rolled and landed in the water. To prevent it floating, Sachiko leaned forward and held it down. (pp. 167-168)

Perhaps typically for Etsuko’s narration, the scene assumes a further disturbing quality due to the contrast between the banality of its tone and the cruelty of the events being portrayed. In this moment, Sachiko’s figure becomes eerily similar to that of the Tokyo woman, not only through the action of murdering a child (or in this case a few cubs) but also because of the “blank expression” that reflects that of her daughter and is reminiscent of the Tokyo woman’s eyes which “didn’t seem to actually see anything”. Even her gesture of taking the kitten out of the water for a moment perfectly mirrors the Tokyo woman showing her drowned baby to Sachiko and Mariko. If Sachiko functions as a ‘screen character’ for Etsuko to project her own guilt, and the Tokyo woman is superimposable onto Sachiko, then it stands to reason that the former also coincides with Etsuko on some level. Given the imagery of the mother killing her own child, it’s easy to argue that the Tokyo woman also represents Etsuko’s repressed guilt over having caused Keiko’s death through a rawer, more direct image than her narration of Sachiko’s story. There is also another level to this interpretation. The vision of the Tokyo woman haunts Mariko like a ghost in a manner quite similar to a traumatic response, given how “[Mariko] didn’t even seem particularly upset at the time” and it is only later that she starts to feel her presence. It was previously established that Mariko stands for Keiko in the Nagasaki narrative, and that the Tokyo woman also represents collective trauma in post-war Japan. Therefore, it could be argued that the woman’s haunting of Mariko is symbolic of how Etsuko’s post-atomic trauma also

created the conditions for Keiko's unhappiness and subsequent suicide. In other words, what this ghost represents is the intergenerational transmissibility of trauma; it connects Etsuko's post-atomic and personal traumas, leaving Keiko as the unfortunate victim. The woman also committing suicide shortly after drowning her baby could also represent the fact that, because of this seemingly inescapable chain created by generational trauma, Etsuko is subconsciously incapable of seeing a real future for herself.

In general, the victimization of children is a recurrent topic throughout the novel, and it ties with the theme of the future being seemingly precluded to the characters. As I have argued in the previous chapter, children in Ishiguro's novels function as a representation of time – either of a past to be nostalgic towards or of a future to look forward to. Arguably, *A Pale View of Hills* leans more towards the second concept, at least superficially. This can be partially evinced in a conversation between Etsuko and Mrs Fujiwara where the latter talks about a young couple she sees every week at the cemetery:

It's a shame, a pregnant girl and her husband spending their Sundays thinking about the dead. [...] They should be thinking about the future. [...] That's no way to bring a child into the world, visiting the cemetery every week... cemeteries are no places for young people. (p. 25)

Drag notes that Mrs Fujiwara's way of thinking "represents a very common attitude among the *hibakusha* – the conviction that, in order to continue living a meaningful life, one must radically leave the past behind and shift one's attention entirely towards the future" (*Revisiting Loss*, p. 103). In this scene, the future is directly correlated to the presence of a child (an incoming one, at least) but also, somewhat paradoxically, juxtaposed to an image of death (the cemetery). This overlapping of children and death is a common motif throughout the novel, one that has further implications as to what it means for the adult characters as well.

In *Killing Children in British Fiction*, Dean explores the implications of identifying children with the future when said children, either fictional or real, die or otherwise disappear. In the case of Ishiguro's novels, this is especially relevant for *A Pale View of Hills* and *Never Let Me Go*. The former prominently features the deaths of many children and youth, for which adults are, directly or indirectly, responsible (Keiko; the baby drowned by its mother during the war; the innumerable deaths caused by the war and the atomic bombing; the victims of serial killings around Nagasaki in the novel's background; possibly even Mariko, whose fate remains uncertain). However, as Dean puts it, "the identities of these children are unstable; they merge and multiply" (p. 185); in other words, they lose their individuality and veer towards the realm of the symbolic. Due to this blurring of identities,

the dead child becomes less of an entity of their own and more of a “signifier”, a metonymic chain connecting “Etsuko’s personal loss with the catastrophes of war, imperialism and atomic bombing” (p. 185). Perhaps, rather than a chain, it would be more apt to define it as a rope, an image that ties (figuratively and literally) the figures of Keiko and Mariko. The meaning behind this signifier, Dean says, is that of an “epistemological lack” (p. 185), an impossibility for the adult to rescue the (now undefined and undefinable) child and therefore their own future.

Notably, in this process of disembodiment, the child is also deprived of their agency. Children in *A Pale View of Hills* seem to almost exclusively take on the role of the helpless victim. An excellent example of this is, I would argue, the scene where Sachiko drowns the kittens, and how the latter’s struggle to survive is portrayed – or rather, *not* portrayed. The narrator never describes the kittens during this scene, as if they’re invisible to her, and their struggles can only be inferred through Sachiko’s comments and the scratch marks on her arms. Arguably, this is representative of how children in the novel are effectively disembodied, present only through absence (as even the most prominent child character, Mariko, is essentially a stand-in for the deceased Keiko) and, in a way, objectified through their lack of agency: Mariko can only stand and watch as her mother drowns the kittens. Even Niki, for all her rebelliousness, fails to accomplish much in regard to her relationship with her mother.

It is my contention that the child thus objectified turns into a disembodied ‘screen’ of the future on which the adults project their own ambitions or into an obstacle that the adult must remove in order to, at least in their vision, secure their own future – or, more often than not, both. This is especially evident in how Sachiko voices her aspirations for her daughter once they’ll go to America:

Mariko will be fine in America, why won’t you believe that? It’s a better place for a child to grow up. And she’ll have far more opportunities there [...] She could become a business girl, a film actress even. America’s like that, Etsuko, so many things are possible. Frank says I could become a business woman too. (p. 46)

It is quite clear that the prospects Sachiko envisions for Mariko’s future are actually her own. However, if that is the case, then Mariko’s reticence about leaving Japan is nothing more than an obstacle to Sachiko’s wishes to move forward. This is where the ambiguity of the image of childhood as both past and present, so pervasive in Ishiguro’s works, comes into play. If, on the one hand, Mariko/Keiko represents the future Sachiko/Etsuko wants for herself, she also risks becoming dead weight that drags her mother back towards a past she would rather escape from. Therefore, the only solution to this paradox that Sachiko/Etsuko can see is to kill the child – physically or metaphorically,

directly or indirectly – to achieve that future, even if, in doing so, such a future would inevitably become stalled, ‘undead’.

Further proof of this is, once again, the way that the ghost of the Tokyo woman haunts the narrative of Sachiko and Mariko’s story. The image of the mother murdering her own child is indelibly etched into Mariko’s gaze and haunts the relationship with her mother like a ghost. The child, who normally embodies the future, becomes affixed to an image of the violent past; this image, in turn, reminds the adult that killing the child might provide a solution to the paradoxical stasis she finds herself in – but only if she’s willing to avert her gaze from the child’s materiality as a human being. In other words, the physical act of killing becomes a metaphorical killing of both past and future. This, however, does not free the adult as it seemed to promise, instead leading them into further stasis, not just for themselves but also for the other surviving children, as shown by the fact that, despite her rebelliousness, Niki’s life has stalled after her sister’s suicide. In spatial terms, this is represented by the utter stillness and banality of Etsuko’s English home. If “America” is the place where one’s ambitions for the future can be realized without limits, then England is where those same ambitions fade out into a limbo that’s ‘good enough’ and nothing more. If viewed in this light, then England becomes the epitome of a project of migration and of renewal of Etsuko’s identity that died out literally halfway through. In ‘Healing Trauma and Reconstructing Identities’, Nguyen and Phan note that “the Japanese identity [Etsuko] tried to forget did not fade” (p. 223); Etsuko tried to distance herself from the past by giving her second daughter a more Western-sounding name (she herself notes that it was borne out of “some selfish desire not to be reminded of the past” (p. 9)), which in a way turns Niki into a second projection of her wish to escape her traumatic past. However, this attempt is doomed to fail as well, as the relationship between the two grows colder and Etsuko is forced to realize that Niki’s adoption of an English lifestyle has left them estranged. As Nguyen and Phan have commented, she has apparently “lost all her daughters in England” (‘Healing Trauma and Reconstructing Identities’, p. 223), and she’s left with nothing but the memories of a traumatic past she wants to forget and what is left of an uncertain, grey, inert future – “the remains of the day”, so to speak.

At the end of the novel, Etsuko doesn’t seem to be any closer to making peace with her past. Rather, she finds herself in a position of utter stasis, where she can’t look towards the future nor the past; she claims she “enjoy[s] the quiet” as “it’s so truly like England”, but at the same time she finds that her England house “is so large now” (pp. 182-183) after both of her daughters have left her. In the end, it seems that the only thing she has left are her memories, traumatic as they may be. This type of circular ending, where the protagonist is left in the same position as the beginning, is also

reprised in *The Unconsoled* in an even more explicit, and perhaps more tragic, manner. And as we will see in the next chapter, it is not the only point that the two novels share.

CHAPTER 3

THE UNCONSOLED, THE GOOD OLD WOUND

The Unconsoled, published in 1995, still stands as the most unusual and experimental of Ishiguro's works, both in its prose (as it heavily employs the stream of consciousness technique) and its use of surrealist logic as a means of exploring the psychology of its protagonist. The story is centered on Mr. Ryder, an internationally famous pianist who has come to an unnamed city in central Europe to perform. Bizarrely, his performance is hailed by many as the one thing that will save the community from the incurable malaise that seems to afflict every one of the inhabitants; this is far from the only unusual or unrealistic plot point of the novel, however, as during his stay Ryder comes across places and people from his life back in England, including his estranged wife and child. Moreover, as the novel goes on, it becomes increasingly clear to the reader that most if not all the characters surrounding the protagonist are, at least partially, his own reflection.

This is possible due to what, with various terms, has been called 'dream logic' – that is, a discarding of realism in favor of a surreal representation of events, often veering into the absurd, similar to what we experience in dreams. Drag notes three main elements that characterize the novel's dreamlike logic: "the occurrence of coincidence, the fluidity of time and space and the prevalence of wish-fulfilment" (*Revisiting Loss*, p. 109). The first can be found in the numerous instances where Ryder meets people from his past even though he's in a foreign country that he has supposedly never visited before. Sometimes characters start out as relative strangers to him, only to gradually become Ryder's own family, as when Gustav's daughter Sophie and her son Boris are slowly revealed to be Ryder's wife and son, respectively. This is compounded by the fact that time and space don't work normally: places are connected in ways that shouldn't be possible, the narrator reports conversations that he shouldn't be able to hear, and time stretches to the point of absurdity as the characters ramble on for pages on end in the span of less than a few minutes.

A perfect example of this is one of the first scenes in the novel, where Ryder is taking the elevator to his hotel room. Even though the ride should only take a minute at most, Gustav the porter engages in a conversation that lasts several pages; then, Ryder asks about a Ms. Hilde who Gustav has just mentioned, only to realize that she is standing right beside him. She reprimands Ryder for missing an

important meeting, and that he has a “tight schedule” to maintain; he decides to ask for it at a more convenient time – which he never does, becoming the source of frequent rushes of panic throughout the story. When he finally gets off the elevator, Ryder realizes that he cannot remember anything about the visit, and when he enters his hotel room, he’s sure it’s the very same room of his aunt’s house in England where he sometimes used to sleep as a child.

This scene serves to set the surreal tone of the novel and to settle the reader into the dreamlike logic of its world. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that there is *no* logic, as Ishiguro himself states in an interview with Kryder:

I think that it is very important to have some kind of laws, just as you do in the waking world, that will maintain consistency throughout. They are different rules from the ones that govern realistic fiction, but I wanted the reader to feel, after the initial period of confusion, that there were new laws. I guess a test of this is to ask: is anything possible in the world of *The Unconsoled*? Well, probably not. If Ryder or any of the characters suddenly grew wings and flew off on page 300, I think that would seem as wrong as it would in, say, a Henry James novel. So although a lot of strange things happen in *The Unconsoled*, there are only really about eight or nine ways in which they are strange... [...] It basically says here’s a world that is seen so much from the point of view of one consciousness that it very boldly appropriates things that it finds to serve its needs. Mr. Ryder can turn certain characters into people from his past, and bend and twist the whole world around into being some big expression of his feelings and emotions. (p. 152)

The fact that Ryder “appropriates things [...] to serve [his] needs” reinforces the idea that the whole story is, as Adelman says, “a seismographic record of Ryder’s psyche” (*Doubles on the Rocks*, p. 168), and points to that element of wish fulfillment that Drăg noted as forming part of the novel’s dream logic. More precisely, the wish that needs to be fulfilled is Ryder’s longing for the love of his parents, which primarily manifests as the idea (eventually revealed to be delusional) that they will come to see the performance that will raise the whole community out of its undefined depression. The origins of Ryder’s trauma are somewhat nebulous, as the only explicit references to his past are made through flashbacks from his childhood, filtered through his unreliable narration. The first one of these is particularly revealing. It comes immediately after Ryder identifies his hotel room with his aunt’s, and it involves him as a child trying to concentrate on his toy soldiers while his parents are busy fighting downstairs:

The ferocity of the voices had been such that, even as a child of six or seven, I had realized this to be no ordinary row. But I had told myself it was nothing and, resting my cheek back down on the green mat, had continued with my battle plans. Near the centre of that green mat had been a

torn patch that had always been a source of much irritation to me. But that afternoon, as the voices raged on downstairs, it had occurred to me for the first time that this tear could be used as a sort of bush terrain for my soldiers to cross. This discovery – that the blemish that had always threatened to undermine my imaginary world could in fact be incorporated into it – had been one of some excitement for me, and that “bush” was to become a key factor in many of the battles I subsequently orchestrated. (pp. 16-17)

The “torn patch” could be a metaphor (or, perhaps, a displaced image) for the notion of wound or rupture that suffuses the entire novel (literally in the case of Brodsky). By incorporating the “torn patch” into his fantasy, Ryder tries to “domesticate the rift, and, by the same token, gain a sense of mastery over it” (*Revisiting Loss*, p. 112) – much in the same way Etsuko tries to cope with the image of her dead daughter by claiming it has grown familiar to her. I would also argue that, like Etsuko, Ryder tries to ignore or disguise the source of his trauma, but unlike her its source isn’t immediately obvious even after we recognize the narrator as unreliable; since the world of *The Unconsoled* is, essentially, a reflection of Ryder’s inner world, the narrator exerts a much more extensive control over it (through the use of dream logic) whereas Etsuko was still mostly bound by realism and relied more on omission. We are never told directly the cause of his parents’ falling out, leaving it to be inferred from clues scattered throughout the novel; Adelman suggests that it might lie in “his father’s drunkenness, his mother’s infidelity, his own illegitimacy” (*Doubles on the Rocks*, p. 171). This would certainly provide an explanation for why Ryder feels that he must earn his parents’ love so strongly.

The cycle of disappointment is a major component at the core of *The Unconsoled*. On the surface of the story, it primarily manifests with Ryder making promises to the other characters that he invariably fails to fulfill. More deeply, it is visible in the dysfunctional dynamics of the families that populate the novel. In the article ‘Fugal Tempo in *The Unconsoled*’, Vinet identifies three main instances of “oedipal triangles” (§ 35), namely Ryder/Sophie/Boris, the Hoffmans, and Miss Collins and Brodsky (with a missing third element that the critic identifies in Brodsky’s dead dog Bruno). In the first case, the critic finds the oedipal element in a scene where Boris attempts to draw Superman (identified with an ideal father figure) only to erase the drawing by scribbling over it, which would constitute a “symbolic murder of the father” (§ 35). Indeed, Ryder’s erasure as a father figure is arguably something that he, himself, desires. Not only is he negligent towards his son (for example, by leaving him to wait for hours in a café while he’s out for an interview), but the attempts made by Sophie to bring the family back together are met with frustration and indifference on Ryder’s part. He blames the failure of the single evening they spend together as a family on Sophie’s cooking:

[...] it was not even as though she had particularly excelled herself with the cooking. She had not thought to provide, for instance, any sardines on little triangles of toast, or any cheese and sausage kebabs. She had not made an omelette of any sort, or any cheese-stuffed potatoes, or fish cakes [...] (p. 288)

The humorously petulant tone with which Ryder lists the fancy dishes Sophie was supposed to serve illustrates Ryder's detachment and emotional sterility. When, later on, Sophie gives Boris a do-it-yourself manual saying it's a gift from his father (a gift which is ironically symbolic of Ryder's renunciation of his parental role), Ryder dismisses it as "just an old manual" (p. 287); when it breaks, he promises to fix it, only to never act on that promise as per usual. His failure as a father and husband becomes undeniable at the end of the novel, when Sophie spits out her definitive sentence ("You were always on the outside of your love. Now look at you. On the outside of our grief too" (p. 532)) before getting off the tram they're all riding on. After a brief moment of despair, Ryder recomposes himself and finds consolation in the breakfast buffet that is being served on the tram (ironically echoing his complaints about Sophie's cooking), deluding himself that his "presence [in the city] had been greatly appreciated just as it had been everywhere [he] had ever gone" (p. 534).

The reason behind Ryder's detachment from his loved ones lies in his childhood trauma; in other words, as Allen puts it, "he repeats the cycle of familial sickness that blighted his own life" ('Leaving Behind Daydreams for Nightmares'). Subconsciously, his own behavior as a father is modeled after his parents, since it's the only way he knows how to *be* a parent. This is apparent in a flashback where Ryder tells his childhood friend Fiona that he has trained himself to enjoy being alone through "training sessions" that bring to mind, and almost parody, the "*fort-da* game" recounted by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Within the context of the novel, Fiona's reply sounds like a tragic prophecy:

"But you know, don't you," Fiona had said to me that afternoon, her face close to mine in the darkness, "when you get married, it needn't be like it is with your mum and dad. It won't be like that at all. Husbands and wives don't always argue all the time. They only argue like that when... when special things happen." (p. 172)

Unfortunately, the opposite becomes true; Ryder's personal trauma turns into generational trauma as he doesn't know how to give a kind of love he has never received in the first place.

Ryder's attempts to earn this love are exemplified in the character of Stephan, the son of the Hoffmans, who is himself an aspiring musician. Like Ryder, Stephan hopes that the rift in his family can be mended if he puts on a good enough performance; Ryder is obsessed with ensuring that "[his]

performance was the richest, the most overwhelming of which [he] was capable” (p. 420) for when his parents (allegedly) arrive, and Stephan wants to prove that he is not a failure of a musician as his parents think (something which, in the Ryder-centric dream logic of the novel’s world, is enough to throw their marriage into disarray and cause a lingering psychosis in his mother). However, as Vinet notes, “the father does his best to avoid Stephan’s meeting the desire of his mother Christine” (‘Fugal Tempo’, ¶ 36); indeed, Mr. Hoffman seems to intentionally sabotage both his son and himself at every possible turn. Stephan himself is under the impression that his parents deliberately encouraged him to perform in front of them “as though they had no memory at all of the anguished history surrounding his piano playing” (p. 68) in order to reassure themselves of their son’s ineptitude – and that, therefore, everything is still the same as it should be. Even Hoffman’s idea of having Stephan perform before Ryder seems to be a plan to set him up for failure, and even though Stephan’s performance is eventually a success, the Hoffmans are not there to see it, having left a few moments prior to avoid seeing their son’s humiliation. In doing so, Mr. Hoffman intentionally perpetuates the cycle of disappointment, perhaps out of a masochistic desire for familiarity. If we go with the (widely accepted) idea that Stephan is a projection of a young Ryder, then Mr. Hoffman’s wish to remain in a state of disappointment could be symbolic of how Ryder, as much as he tries, cannot mend his relationship with his parents anymore, as they are no longer present in his life (it is unknown whether they’re even still alive). Ryder’s image of his father is forever stuck in the past, where he did not care for him, and therefore Mr. Hoffman cannot hope to escape from that same role that he plays in Ryder’s theater of the mind.

Brodsky, who forms the third of Vinet’s “oedipal triangles” with Ms. Collins, is even more overt than Mr. Hoffman in his masochistic tendencies due to his trauma being physical as well as psychological. Acquired a long time before the beginning of the novel in unspecified circumstances, Brodsky’s wound “becomes a significant component of [his] self-definition” (*Revisiting Loss*, p. 124). The conductor himself explains his relationship with his wound to Ryder:

When I conducted my orchestra, I always touched my wound, caressed it. Some days I picked at its edges, even pressed it hard between the fingers. You realize soon enough when a wound’s not going to heal [...] I liked the feeling, pressing the wound, it fascinated me. A good wound, it can do that, it fascinates. It looks a little different every day [...] But then you touch it and you know it’s the same, your old friend. (p. 313)

Brodsky displays a morbid attachment to his wound, which becomes the object of Ms. Collins’s criticism that his music “will only ever be about that silly little wound”, which is in fact “nothing special at all” (p. 498). Brodsky is similar to Mr. Hoffman in that he is too self-absorbed in his own

pain to avoid squandering every opportunity he has to fix his life – namely, to regain Ms. Collins’s affections and to combat his alcoholism. Alcoholism is also one of the possible reasons behind the furious rows between Ryder’s parents, and if we also take into account Brodsky’s similarities with Mr. Hoffman, it would not be a stretch to assume that the conductor represents another, more pitiful projection of Ryder’s father. According to Vinet, the missing spot of this “oedipal triangle” is filled by Ryder himself: “the son has been replaced by a dog who symbolically dies shortly after Ryder’s arrival as if to leave room for Ryder to play the protective son” (‘Fugal Tempo’, ¶ 37). However, Brodsky’s character could also be interpreted as a projection of Ryder’s fears regarding his own future – especially considering the imposter syndrome plaguing him. Adelman puts it clearly: “in the parodic mirror of his dream world, Brodsky is his future, Ryder “found out”, Ryder become a drunk like his father, but also Ryder become his father in Brodsky’s relationship with Miss Collins, and at the same time the boy astonishing his parents with his performance” (‘Doubles on the Rocks’, p. 175). In other words, what Ryder fears the most is being exposed as a fraud like Christoff and Brodsky, as that would preclude the possibility of earning that parental love he longs for; at the same time, however, he’s blissfully ignorant that he has already become like his father in his own way, with the lack of love he shows to his own family.

As the reader watches these archetypes in Ryder’s dream world unfold, they will inevitably notice a common thread uniting all of them. At the core of all of the instances of dysfunctional families that we examined lies the notion of repetition compulsion. Ryder, Stephan, Hoffman, Brodsky – all of them live in the shadow of a trauma that they subconsciously force themselves to reenact. “The compulsion to repeat,” says Drag, “is also a feature of traumatic memory since it represents the failure of the work of remembering [...] The ordeals which have been repressed [...] must be constantly reenacted” (*Revisiting Loss*, p. 128). In other words, Ryder’s (as himself and as his projections) desire to forget his past is, at the same time, perpetuated and thwarted by his compulsion to repeat it, to put it on stage via the actors of his theater of the mind. However, the failure of memory also implies being precluded from one’s future, which cannot be built without remembering the past; Reitano says that “[Ryder] does not wish to regain the “origin”, but to sustain his distance from it. In *The Unconsoled* ground is never “recovered”, only “lost”, deliberately, in order to begin again *without beginning*” (‘The Good Wound’, p. 371, emphasis in original). Arguably, the best description of repetition compulsion in the novel is given by Mrs. Hoffman herself:

As soon as the day starts, this other thing, this force, it comes and takes over. And whatever I do, everything between us just goes another way, not the way I want it. I fight against it, Mr Ryder, but over the years I've steadily lost ground. It's something that's... that's happening to me. (pp. 416-417)

The effect that this “force” has on the characters is making them stuck in time, stranded in a point of their story that they cannot hope to escape. I would argue that, due to its dreamlike structure, *The Unconsoled* is, among Ishiguro’s novels, the one in which the chronology-distorting effects of trauma emerge the most clearly. This is visible not only in the concrete elements from Ryder’s past that pop up in places where they logically shouldn’t (the hotel room, the wreck of his parents’ car), but also in the way his projections are all representative of himself in multiple points in time but, as characters, are all present at once. Stephan represents a young Ryder who takes up music to prove himself to his parents, but he carries this obsession all the way to the present, to the point that it stands as the only true force driving him; Brodsky is an afterimage of Ryder’s father, but also of Ryder himself, as he fears he will find himself in the future, drunken and ridiculed, once the cycle of disappointment that stands as the primary ‘engine’ of the novel finally catches up to him. It is a future he wants to avoid at all costs, but also one that he feels is inevitable. At the same time, however, he cannot go back to the past, as the process of ‘true’ remembrance would be too disruptive for his (already fragile) self-image. The way Ryder uses memory is by “wallpapering over the difficult bits” (*The Novels of Kazuo Ishiguro*, p. 151), covering the past through creative misremembering rather than uncovering it; as Drag notes, “in the reality of his dream, Ryder is invariably lost and inert – more acted upon than acting, yet, in retrospect, he views his actions as voluntary and purposeful. Attaching false significance to the randomness of past actions is an instance of such creative and order-enhancing misremembering” (*Revisiting Loss*, p. 130). Like Etsuko, Ryder has become ‘stuck in time’ unwilling to remember yet unable to forget, and the cracks in his willful amnesia show through the space-time distortions that allow his past to randomly reemerge in the city of the unconsoled. The continuous resurfacing of trauma when it has not been processed and worked through can be best summed up by a quote from Žižek: “the opposite of *existence* is not nonexistence, but *insistence*: that which does not exist, continues to *insist*, striving towards existence” (*Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, p. 22, emphasis in original).

Being Ryder’s “dreamscape”, it is worth noting that the unnamed city of *The Unconsoled* is also caught in its own cycle of disappointment caused by trauma. The Germanic names of the characters and the hints that the town has gone through an ideological conflict of some sorts (embodied in the figure of Max Sattler, whose name is a mix and match of Marx, Stalin and Hitler) allows us to set the novel in late-twentieth-century central Europe. That said, in the author’s intentions, the geographical and temporal coordinates of the novel aren’t that important:

It was very late in the day that I decided to use Germanic names. In a way I could change them all to Scandinavian names, or even French names. You know, I'd have to change a few details, the style of certain houses or whatever, but you could almost set that thing down anywhere. It was by and large a landscape of imagination. (*Conversations with Kazuo Ishiguro*, p. 131)

In this regard, Matović notes that “while the unnamed city of the novel is interpreted as Ryder’s *memoryscape*, on account of which its geographical and historical determinants are to a certain degree interchangeable, the crisis which unsettles the community is very much a modern crisis” (‘Collective Memory’, p. 193, emphasis in original). She interprets this crisis through the words of Farrell, who points to “a mood of cultural crisis: a sense that something has gone terribly wrong in the modern world, something that we can neither assimilate nor put right” (*Post-traumatic Culture*, ix-x). This crisis, Matović claims, “has undeniable affinities with the traumatic” (p. 194), and much like the various traumas affecting the characters, its causes are left vague. The effects, on the other hand, are very much visible, as succinctly explained in the novel by Pedersen, a member of the Citizens’ Mutual Support Group: “Each of us could recount dozens of sad cases. Of lives blighted by loneliness. Of families despairing of ever rediscovering the happiness they’d once taken for granted” (p. 113). As a result of its mysterious trauma, the city of the unconsolated is gradually losing its identity, which is most likely based on music as a tool of cultural cohesion. However, the way the town expresses this identity is, essentially, through “a personality cult” (‘Collective Memory’, p. 195); the community entrusts its musical representatives with ultimate authority and prestige, only to discard them when they inevitably fail to live up to its unreasonably high expectations. Christoff, Brodsky, and now Ryder; the town is always looking for its next savior, but in doing so it only perpetuates the same cycle of disappointment that plagues its inhabitants. In other words, the city itself can also be considered as one of the characters trapped in the vicious cycle of repetition compulsion, forever repeating the very same mistakes that has brought it to its current low point without even realizing it.

As Reitano says, “the city of the unconsolated lays its hopes in a revival of the past that has been lost and forgotten” (‘The Good Wound’, p. 370); this past is represented by the controversial yet mysterious character of Max Sattler. Pedersen explains to Ryder that “Sattler has gained a place in the *imaginings* of citizens here. His role, if you like, has become mythical. Sometimes he’s feared, sometimes he’s abhorred. And at other times, his memory is worshipped” (p. 374). As the bearer of an unspecified yet complex and poignant extreme ideology, Sattler is essentially a metonymy of a past that is idealized, sometimes positively and sometimes negatively, for the community to either identify with or reject altogether – in other words, he functions as an identity marker. However,

Pedersen is also quick to point out that “he holds an attraction for certain people *precisely because* he’s so distant, a piece of local myth” (p. 375). The town cannot earnestly engage with its troubled past because doing so would mean being forced to reevaluate its present values and identity in relation to its origins; instead, it prefers to cling onto hollow, yet comforting narratives that allow it to live in an eternal present (as depressing and frustrating as it is) without confronting its past or future. This, I would argue, is an almost exact mirror of how Ryder wishes to evade his trauma, and yet (like Sattler’s monument) it keeps appearing before him and insisting to be acknowledged – something which, given how the city is essentially Ryder’s “memoryscape”, should come as no surprise. Interestingly, this arguably means that an instance of collective trauma behaves in ways that are closer to individual trauma, contrary to Hirschberger’s theories. This represents a difference from *A Pale View of Hills*, where collective and individual trauma were linked but otherwise kept separate.

Another way in which *The Unconsoled* differs from Ishiguro’s first novel is the meaning of the child as a symbol of time. In *A Pale View of Hills*, the child possessed a paradoxical quality that made them symbolic of both an anchor to the past and a future that is, at best, uncertain. In *The Unconsoled*, on the other hand, childhood seems to be devoid of that representativeness of the future that is traditionally associated with it; in this sense, it is telling that the town of the unconsoled seeks its future not among its young people, but in elderly figures such as Christoff and Brodsky. For the most part, this is yet another symptom of the characters’ state of perpetual stasis, but I would argue that, in a more solipsist view of the novel, this inability to see the child as the future is also partially due to Ryder’s own narcissism. Ryder is a completely self-absorbed character, tending towards his own past (which he’d rather forget) while stuck, partially of his own volition, in an eternal present. In the novel, the only way he can see children (here with the wider meaning of ‘sons’) is either as a projection of himself in his youth (Stephan) or as, essentially, dead weight (Boris). Even when he tries to justify him neglecting his family to Boris, he can’t help but come across as self-centered:

Well, you have to understand, the reason I keep going on these trips, it's not because I don't love you and dearly want to be with you [...] But you see, it's not so simple. I have to keep going on these trips because, you see, you can never tell when it's going to come along. I mean the very special one, the very important trip, the one that's very very important, not just for me but for everyone, everyone in the whole world.[...] So you see, Boris, that's why. That's why I've got to carry on for the moment, keep travelling all the time. It makes things very difficult for us, I realise. But we have to be strong and patient, all three of us. It won't be much longer, I'm sure. It'll come soon, the very important one, then it will all be done, I'll be able to relax and rest then. [...] It

won't be long now, I'm sure of it, but we'll just have to be patient. Boris, I hope you can understand what I'm saying. (pp. 217-218)

The fact that Boris doesn't reply and barely seems to register Ryder's whole speech could be indicative of how Ryder's excuses are more for himself than for his son, and that he's using Boris as a proxy. Adding to this, Ryder is far from the only father figure to view his son as a tool to use selfishly; as Flor notes, Hoffman and Brodsky also share a "utilization of the child figure for their own purposes of self-restoration" ('Unreliable Selves in an Unreliable World', p. 165). Brodsky sees his dog Bruno as a surrogate child that could keep him and Ms. Collins together ("We could keep an animal. We could love and care for it together. Perhaps that was what we didn't have before. [...] We never had children. So let's do this instead" (p. 274)), and Hoffman apparently sees no intrinsic value in Stephan other than as a tool to mend his relationship with his wife – even if he does end up systematically (and masochistically) sabotaging him and himself. Like in *A Pale View of Hills*, children are, in a word, objectified.

Even though the traumas they portray are radically different both in substance (a collective traumatic experience *par excellence* as opposed to a highly individual and elusive childhood trauma) and in portrayal (reticent realism versus dream logic), *A Pale View of Hills* and *The Unconsoled* share many similarities. As Drag notes, they "are both dedicated to exploring the ways in which memory negotiates and represents trauma" and they "point to its ambiguous role as an apparatus capable of concealing and accentuating the traumatic past" (*Revisiting Loss*, p. 133). Indeed, both Etsuko and Ryder try (and fail) to repress their traumas, with the 'creative' use of memory as their primary tool. However, this trait is far from exclusive to these two novels. All three of the novels that will be examined in the following chapters also explore remembrance and misremembrance as major parts of their core themes, albeit with different perspectives. As we will see in the following, in *When We Were Orphans* the past is not only a 'storage' of traumatic memories to forget, but also (and perhaps mostly) the source of a feeling central to Ishiguro's more recent works: nostalgia.

CHAPTER 4

WHEN WE WERE ORPHANS: RECOVERING THE LOST CHILD

After the mixed reception of *The Unconsoled*, *When We Were Orphans* was published in 2000, to “puzzling response” (*The Novels of Kazuo Ishiguro*, p. 123); the critics’ ambivalence towards Ishiguro’s fifth novel is perfectly encapsulated in McDermott’s review, where she regards the novel as “by turns, brilliant and dull, absorbing and unfathomable, fascinating and a bit of a mess” (‘Whodunit?’, p. 25). This response has been, for the most part, caused by Ishiguro’s attempt to reconcile the realism of his previous novels with some of the surrealist techniques and themes found in *The Unconsoled*.

The novel revolves around Christopher Banks, a detective born in the International Settlement of Shanghai and raised in England, who returns to his childhood home to investigate his parents’ disappearance decades after the fact. The narration is structured in a somewhat similar way to *The Remains of the Day*, being comprised of seven instalments each written at a different point of Banks’s life in a diary-like format. This structure arguably represents a ‘return to form’ of sorts for Ishiguro, whose previous works had been renowned for their subdued realism, as well as a tool to put the theme of memory to the front and center of the novel. Memory and its ‘sibling’, nostalgia, are the thematic pillars around which *When We Were Orphans* (alongside its successor *Never Let Me Go*) is centered, and analyzing their interplay with the notions of trauma and childhood is, arguably, essential to understanding the novel as a whole.

In the first part, Banks recounts his education in England and his rise as a star detective. He mentions the traumatic experience of losing his parents only briefly: “my lack of parents [...] had by then long ceased to be of any great inconvenience to me” (p. 6). At a first glance, his words seem to echo Etsuko’s statement that “the horror of that image [of her dead daughter] has long ceased to be a morbid matter”. Like her, Banks wishes to project a sense of having come to terms with his loss; his resolve to become a detective appears to others as the constructive conclusion of a process of mourning, while in reality it represents “a curious deferral of accepting loss, rooted in the naïve belief that [...] his parents are all the time out there waiting to be rescued by him” (*Revisiting Loss*, p. 144). Unlike Etsuko, Banks’s reticence regarding his trauma does not stem from a sense of guilt, but from

denial as he clings to the incredibly faint hope that it can be undone by finding his parents even after many years have passed. In a broader sense, for Banks rescuing his parents is the key to recovering the ‘golden years’ of his childhood and returning to a world that, to him, is more familiar and logical; in other words, to not be an orphan anymore. This metonymic line of reasoning verges on the absurd, yet it arguably stands at the core of Banks’s actions. Right from the start, the reader gets the sense that the protagonist is almost obsessively attached to his early life, as the second part of the novel is dedicated to describing Banks’s childhood in Shanghai in extremely vivid detail, focusing especially on his memories of playing with his Japanese friend Akira and his discussions with him. Banks’s rose-tinted glasses haven’t quite cracked yet, and as the novel goes on it becomes increasingly clearer that, in one way or the other, he has never left those years. We find hints of this all the way from the beginning of the novel (such as his former classmate in England stating that he was “such an odd bird at school”, which he vehemently denies by saying that he “blended perfectly into English school life” (p. 7)), but eventually Banks himself makes it explicit:

The colonel nodded. “Our childhood seems so far away now. All this”—he gestured out of the vehicle—“so much suffering. One of our Japanese poets, a court lady many years ago, wrote of how sad this was. She wrote of how our childhood becomes like a foreign land once we have grown.”

“Well, Colonel, it’s hardly a foreign land to me. In many ways, it’s where I’ve continued to live all my life. It’s only now I’ve started to make my journey from it.” (p. 277)

It is no coincidence that *Hardly a Foreign Land* was the working title of *When We Were Orphans* (‘The Strange Case of the Disappearing Chinamen’, ¶ 1) as, in many ways, Banks still possesses the mindset he had as a child. Drag points out that “his actions resemble less and less those of a self-possessed adult, let alone a detective, and follow the impatient, impulsive logic of a child” (*Revisiting Loss*, p. 145), especially when he believes he is close to finding his parents. In the earlier parts of the novel, Banks’s hope that he can rescue his parents strikes the reader as naïve, but not delusional; it is only when he believes he has found the kidnappers’ hideout and resolves to reach it even in the middle of a warzone that his trauma-borne mental instability becomes fully apparent. Accordingly, from that point the narration becomes increasingly “expressionistic” (*Revisiting Loss*, p. 147), not unlike the narration in *The Unconsoled*; much like Ryder’s world is driven by coincidence and projection, so does Banks believe that the wounded Japanese soldier he coincidentally ran into is, in fact, his long-lost friend Akira – with the major difference that, unlike what happened in *The Unconsoled*’s dream world, the reader has good reason to suspect that he is actually not Akira. According to Holmes, this “increasingly surrealistic narration” is the “neurotic result of his desperate need to heal the emotional

wound inflicted by his parents' disappearance and to regain the Edenic innocence that he had known as a boy" ('Realism, Dreams and the Unconscious', p. 17) – which is also the reason why he's so insisting that the soldier is actually Akira. Rather than avoiding his traumatic past, Banks keeps engaging with it; he refuses to mourn it, to let it go – in Zinck's words, "healing, ultimately, matters less than keeping the wound raw" ('The Palimpsest of Memory', ¶ 42), a wording which draws an interesting parallel between Banks and Brodsky. Both try and keep their trauma fresh in their mind out of a need for familiarity, but whereas Brodsky's caressing of his wound is a self-comforting habit borne out of repetition compulsion, Banks wishes to cling onto a world he perceives as ideal but doesn't exist anymore – if it has ever existed. In other words, the trauma-induced inability to move on manifests for Brodsky and the other unconsolated as a masochistic cycle that keeps them in the present, while for Banks as a wish to return to the past and 'correct' the flow of history.

Nostalgia, childhood and orphanhood also seem to acquire a moral dimension in *When We Were Orphans*. Unlike the protagonists of Ishiguro's previous novels, who seemed to essentially drift through life without thinking much about the hand they were dealt (Stevens in particular, but also Etsuko and Ryder), Banks appears to be a determined individual driven by a marked sense of justice. While reflecting on a letter by his paramour Sarah Hemmings (who is most likely one of the "orphans" referenced in the title) near the end of the novel, he draws an explicit line between the state of orphanhood and his "sense of mission": "But for those like us, our fate is to face the world as orphans, chasing through long years the shadows of vanished parents. There is nothing for it but to try and see through our missions to the end" (p. 313). Banks's idealistic belief that it is one's duty to fight evil wherever it presents itself stems from his trauma: he sees it as his mission to fight the evil that swallowed his parents and now threatens global peace. Banks professes this creed to a doubtful inspector:

And those of us whose duty it is to combat evil, we are . . . how might I put it? We're like the twine that holds together the slats of a wooden blind. Should we fail to hold strong, then everything will scatter. (p. 135)

It is interesting to note that Banks did not come up with this simile himself. He is quoting, almost word for word, something that Akira said to him when they were children:

We children, he said, were like the twine that kept the slats held together. A Japanese monk had once told him this. We often failed to realise it, but it was we children who bound not only a family, but the whole world together. If we did not do our part, the slats would fall and scatter over the floor. (p. 73)

The juxtaposition of these two passages binds together the notions of childhood and idealistic morality and explains Banks's "sense of mission". Childhood is, for Banks, the period of time when his ideals were forged in their purest form, and orphanhood means becoming estranged from that purity; having "to face the world as orphans" means, essentially, "yearning to recover the assurances and the moral clarity which adulthood has dashed" (*Revisiting Loss*, p. 149). While nostalgia is, essentially, a form of self-deception like we have seen in Ishiguro's previous novels, in *When We Were Orphans* it arguably acquires positive moral connotations as well. To this regard, the author states this in an interview with Shaffer:

[Nostalgia] is something that anchors us emotionally to a sense that things should and can be repaired. We can feel our way towards a better world because we've had an experience of it; we carry some sort of distant memory of that world somewhere even though it is a flawed memory, a flawed vision. We feel maybe that we can return to that world. (pp. 166-167)

Ishiguro's ideas on the value of nostalgia are echoed in the novel by the Japanese soldier: "When we nostalgic, we remember. A world better than this world we discover when we grow. We remember and wish good world come back again. So very important" (p. 263). Therefore, it could be argued that childhood (and the adult's sense of nostalgia for it) represents not only a 'mythical', idealized past that is now impossible to recover, but also the enduring hope for a better future in the face of a gritty reality that the adult has accepted as the only possible one. Even if our memories of that time are unreliable, based more on our current wishes than factual reality, they nonetheless comprise a fundamental part of our identity and values. It could be argued that this represents a departure from the previous novels that we analyzed, where self-deception was an essentially self-destructive force that kept the protagonist captive in the limbo of a static present rather than providing a springboard to push forward.

Nostalgia, however, inevitably implies loss and detachment from this past. Earlier in the exchange quoted above, the Japanese soldier talks about his son:

My son [...] He know nothing, nothing. He think world is good place. Kind people. His toys. His mother, father [...] When my boy. He discover world is not good. [...] I wish I with him. To help him. When he discover. (pp. 262-263)

In the same chapter, Banks himself undergoes a similar process of disillusionment that 'Akira' imagines for his son, culminating in the final revelation (fully in the style of the genre of the detective novel) of the truth behind his parents' disappearance. The relatively unsatisfying, mundane nature of the climax is representative, I would argue, of the descent from childlike (and/or childish) idealism

to the cynicism of adulthood. Banks not only discovers that his father ran away with his mistress only to die from illness some time later, but also that his comfortable life in England was funded by blood money from the Chinese warlord Wang Ku in exchange for keeping his mother as a concubine. In the end, Banks discovers that his father's disappearance had nothing to do with the "evil" he made it his mission to fight, and that in fact he (albeit unknowingly) has been complicit in that same evil. Years later, after coming back to England near the end of the novel, Banks goes to visit a woman who is presumably his mother (but since she doesn't quite remember him as a result of dementia, the reader can't be fully sure she actually is, especially after Banks's encounter with the Japanese soldier) and has yet another realization:

I realized she'd never ceased to love me, not through any of it. All she'd ever wanted was for me to have a good life. And all the rest of it, all my trying to find her, trying to save the world from ruin, that wouldn't have made any difference either way. (pp. 305-306)

There is, I would argue, a hint of Ryder in Banks's words. Just as Ryder wished to mend the rift in his family through music, Banks's mission in life has been, up to this point, to restore the world of his childhood by saving his parents. Both (more or less consciously) wish to 'fix' their trauma by returning to an 'ideal' state that actually never was, but whereas Ryder is doomed to fail because of his narcissism and inability to move on, Banks seems to accept his loss, even if he has to renounce his idealism in order to do so. In the closing lines of the novel, he claims that his "major ambition in life these days is to keep this rheumatism at bay" (p. 309) and enjoying the company of his adoptive daughter Jennifer. Despite a lingering sense of melancholy, Banks is able to let go of his nostalgia and accept his condition as an orphan, both of his parents and of his childhood ideals.

There have been various metaphorical readings of the novel tied to the concept of orphanhood. In particular, Zincks notes that in the novel "orphanhood becomes a metaphor for universal trauma" which stems from "surviving childhood loss and the rite of passage" ('The Palimpsest of Memory', ¶¶ 7-39). In other words, he posits that becoming an orphan, symbolically or literally, is a universal experience which is a fundamental part of becoming an adult and is always traumatic to some degree; the novel would, then, metaphorically equate orphanhood with adulthood, thus tying the latter with the concept of traumatic loss. This interpretation seems to be corroborated by Ishiguro's own words in an interview: "When I say 'orphan', it is in that very broader sense of having left the protective bubble of childhood" ('Like Idealism', p. 184). Banks's struggle with coming to terms with the loss of his childhood would, therefore, be a dramatization of the general human experience of growing up, and that the use of the past tense in the title of the novel is indicative of the conclusion of that process of mourning - "grossly delayed" (*Revisiting Loss*, p. 149) by Banks's tight grip on his own

idealism. Arguably, such a reading would align *When We Were Orphans* with a more essentialist, ‘traditional’ view of childhood – for, if becoming an orphan and therefore an adult is part of a universal experience, it stands to reason that the portion of themselves that the individual becomes an orphan of during this traumatic passage (that is, childhood) must also be part of a universal human experience. I agree with this interpretation only in part. While it is clear that the author intended for Banks’s experience to relate to the more general concept of maturation, a universal idea of childhood (and therefore of adulthood) implies a direct connection between the child and the adult selves; since there is no way for the adult to return to their childhood state, such a connection can only be done through memory, which, as demonstrated so far, is anything but reliable in Ishiguro’s novels – even less so when trauma interferes with its functioning. When Banks recalls his childhood, he can only do so in terms of his current adult desires; even if his idealism is rooted in that very same childhood, his memories are inevitably tinted by his current circumstances and do not represent in any way an objective gateway to the factual past.

Going back to Banks’s individual experience as a protagonist, his nostalgia and trauma also seem to acquire a political dimension in relation to his status as a migrant. There are subtle hints in the novel that Banks’s childhood trauma might be intertwined with his national identity, both in cause and resolution. During one of his conversations with Akira (right before the latter’s ‘twine’ comment), Banks asks him if he knows the reason why his parents have stopped talking to each other:

“I know why they stop. I know why.” Then turning to me, he said: “Christopher. You not enough Englishman.” [...] “It same for me,” he said. “Mother and Father, they stop talk. Because I not enough Japanese.” [...]

As I may have said already, I tended to regard Akira as a worldly authority on many aspects of life, and so I listened to him that day with great care. My parents stopped talking to one another, he told me, whenever they became deeply unhappy with my behaviour—and in my case, this was on account of my not behaving sufficiently like an Englishman. If I thought about it, he said, I would be able to link each of my parents’ silences to some instance of my failing in this way. (pp. 72-73)

Banks’s perceived lack of ‘Englishness’ seems to cause him a certain degree of guilt, to the point that he could be unconsciously tying it to his father’s disappearance. When Akira asks him “If father not found. You must go England?” he freezes at the “startling notion” as if in panic, before hastily replying that “Even if Father isn’t found, we’ll live here for ever” (p. 72). ‘Englishness’ seems to be tied to his idealized childhood, as it becomes apparent when he describes his family’s home in Shanghai:

If I close my eyes a moment, I am able to bring back that picture very vividly: the carefully tended “English” lawn, the afternoon shadows cast by the row of elms separating my garden and Akira’s; and the house itself, a huge white edifice with numerous wings and trellised balconies. I suspect this memory of the house is very much a child’s vision, and that in reality, it was nothing so grand. (p. 51)

On the other hand, Banks’s attitude towards England itself is much more ambivalent. Even though he denies it, Banks’s time in what is supposedly his motherland left him unhappy and unable to properly fit in. That said, he recognizes in hindsight that he did consider England a foreign country: “It was this notion that I was ‘going home’ which caused my emotions to get the better of me [...] As I saw it, I was bound for a strange land where I did not know a soul, while the city steadily receding before me contained all I knew” (p. 28). It is interesting to note that, throughout the narration, the word “home”, is used exclusively in reference to Shanghai or Banks’s family house and never once to England. In an ironic inversion, the colonizer’s homeland becomes the place of his exile.

Colonialism and national identity are deeply linked to the notions of lost childhood and exile. By returning to England, Banks’s own sense of national identity becomes muddled as he does not feel any connection whatsoever to his homeland; his heart lies solely in Shanghai. On the other hand, a part of his idealized childhood that he wishes to recover is his own sense of “Englishness”. There seems to be a correlation between a strong national identity and the imaginary idyll of childhood: by rescuing his parents, thus returning to an ideal “un-orphaned” state, Banks will also restore English authority in Shanghai – at least, in his mind. The logic is quite backwards, befitting the more surrealist elements of the novel: by rescuing his parents, Banks will be able to ‘rewind time’ back to his childhood, which necessarily implies the end of the current war and the return to ‘peaceful’ colonial rule. What these two states have in common is the idea of clinging to a past that never actually existed, or that is so unidentifiable in memory as to be inconsistent. Banks’ trip to Shanghai is meant to find out the truth about his past and therefore his identity – a truth that, in his self-deception, he fails to discover for himself, and when it is revealed to him is found to be hollow. He cannot be reunited with his family, and the Shanghai of the present is no longer the one of his childhood; he can no longer claim a secure national and/or colonial identity for himself. Therefore, Banks remains an orphan both of his parents and of a nation, but the ending seems to hint that this might not be entirely negative.

Orphanhood seems to be tied to a nomadic identity, more in line with the mainstream values of Blairite 90s UK. In *A Pale View of Hills*, the status of the nationless nomad was problematic, traumatic even as it was implicated as the cause of Keiko’s suicide; meanwhile, in *When We Were Orphans* there seems to be a silver lining. Banks does manage to receive some closure, if likely illusory, by

meeting the woman who may or may not be his mother. Unlike Stevens and Ryder, he's not doomed to perpetually experience the loss of a past that never was, but he learns to embrace his condition of orphan; he recognizes that the image of his past family is just that, an image, and manages to build a new one through his connection with Jennifer (who is, herself, an orphan). That is not to say that the ending isn't steeped with melancholy, but that – somewhat atypically for Ishiguro – it isn't completely hopeless. Banks's feelings about his new home in London are ambiguous: he claims that the city "has come to be [his] home" but also that "there are those times when a sort of emptiness fills [his] hours" (p. 313). Naugrette cannot help but notice that "this new 'home' sounds empty, or at least it is not full, as opposed to what his former 'home' in Shanghai used to be" ('The Postponement of Home', ¶ 21). Banks's condition at the end of the novel arguably mirrors Etsuko's as both are middle-aged people living in an England that does not quite feel like home, but whereas Etsuko was seemingly stuck in a limbo without having ever confronted her trauma or having made peace with her daughter Niki, we get the sense that Banks's contentment is at least partially genuine, helped by the fact that, having let go of his "mission", he has forged a real bond with his adopted daughter Jennifer.

Having said that, one must note that the image of the orphan as the exiled, as the migrant child, is important not only to the individual but to society at large, and ties into the notions of humanitarian aesthetics and international crises. In his article 'Ishiguro and the abandoned child: The parody of international crisis and representation in *When We Were Orphans*', Dean argues that, in *When We Were Orphans*, the link between the image of the abandoned child and the representation of an international crisis is parodical in nature. The expectations that are put on Banks are hyperbolically heavy as those surrounding him assume that a resolution of the case of his parents' disappearance will also bring about an end to the conflict in Shanghai's International Settlement – in a manner not too dissimilar to those that are put on Ryder's shoulders in *The Unconsolated*, where the hopes of the entire community hinge on his performance. For Dean, the abandoned child serves as the symbol of crisis, but in an objectified way: their agency is denied entirely, as their purpose is to hold up the narrative of a 'moral' Western intervention without challenging those elements that made the intervention necessary in the first place. We can see it after Banks' parents disappear and other people have to deliberate over his fate:

I was sitting in [...] the centre of the room. I could sense it was a chair reserved only for the most important of personages, but on this occasion, owing to the gravity of the circumstances, or perhaps as a sort of consolation, it had been given to me. [...] No matter how I tried, I could not find a dignified way to sit in it [...] (p. 24)

The child is seen as deserving of sympathy, but not dignity. Compassion is seen as admissible because children don't carry with them potentially dangerous implications of a foreign identity; following the traditional idea of childhood, they are viewed as blank slates without agency, therefore exempt from the paranoia that migration brings with it – as long as they allow themselves to be molded into the dominant culture. Since he grew up in the International Settlement, Banks' position in this matter is ambivalent; he is noted by Canon Moorly to have “a special relationship to what is, in truth, the source of all our current anxieties” (p. 138) as he is viewed as an Englishman who “is tainted for having exposed the contamination of the innocent, affective interior of family and ethnicity with the migratory other” (*Ishiguro and the Abandoned Child*, p. 159). This sense of ‘contamination’ is perfectly visible in colonel Chamberlain's words after he ‘rescues’ the child Banks:

Shanghai's not a bad place. But [...] you've had about as much as you need. Much more, you'll be turning into a Chinaman [...] you're going to England. You're going home. (p. 28)

These words are representative of the colonizers' fear that “Banks's interior life might be irretrievably “othered” by his Shanghai childhood” (*Killing Children in British Fiction*, pp. 231-232). On the other hand, uncle Philip sees in Banks's ‘international’ upbringing the first step towards a utopian, globalized future:

You know what I think, Puffin? I think it would be no bad thing if boys like you *all* grew up with a bit of everything. We might all treat each other a good deal better then. Be less of these wars for one thing. Oh yes. Perhaps one day, all these conflicts will end, and it won't be because of great statesmen or churches or organisations like this one. It'll be because people have changed. They'll be like you, Puffin. More a mixture. So why not become a mongrel? It's healthy. (p. 76)

Despite their ideological differences, Canon Moorly's, colonel Chamberlain's and uncle Philip's views have one thing in common: the aestheticization of the ‘global’ child. In both cases, Banks is asked to perform a role, either to “demonstrate both his Britishness and his special connection to Shanghai, allowing the latter to be reassuringly formulated within a heroic colonial narrative” (*Killing Children in British Fiction*, p. 232) or to be the representative of “a utopian form of affective identification”; both exemplify “a latently violent politics, one in which Banks is constantly read, but cannot speak for himself” (*Ishiguro and the Abandoned Child*, p. 160). Like in *A Pale View of Hills*, the child is objectified, deprived of agency, so that the adults can project their ambitions onto them; but whereas in that novel these ambitions were individual, in *When We Were Orphans* they are ideological and political.

As a result of the contradictory demands that are placed on him, Banks' identity oscillates between that of the abandoned foreign child and the British he recognizes himself as. This "scattered state" compels him to pursue the career of detective "to restore his own relation both to his parents and to his ethno-national identity", to discover the truth about himself and, in doing so, defend the "moral borders" of British identity – the nation's as well as his own ('Ishiguro and the Abandoned Child', p. 159). The quest he undertakes is absurd and contradictory as he is positioned as both the abandoned child and his savior, thus descending into parody.

This sort of 'quantum superposition' of roles is a recurring theme in the novel and it applies to other characters as well, tying back to the surrealist and solipsist themes of *The Unconsoled*. The male/father figure in Banks's memories is simultaneously his father, his uncle and a Chinese warlord; the Japanese soldier he runs into is both his childhood friend Akira and a complete stranger who takes pity of him; the woman he goes to meet at the hospital near the end of the novel is both his long-lost mother and an elderly patient with dementia who just wants some company. In other words, the past overflows into the present, making the two indistinguishable from each other – which represents yet another point of contact between this novel, *The Unconsoled* and *A Pale View of Hills*. In particular, Duangfai argues that 'Akira' fulfils a similar role to Sachiko as a character who is essentially conjured up by the narrator as a coping mechanism, but with an important distinction: while Sachiko functions as a 'container' for Etsuko to relieve her guilt of having failed her daughter, here 'Akira' "carries out his role more in a process of displacement" and "is more likely a substitute object of love, when Banks believes that he has lost his parents' love" (*Psychological Disorder*, p. 171).

Relatedly, an essential similarity between the three novels lies in the unreliability of their narrators. In both *The Unconsoled* and *When We Were Orphans*, this unreliability stems from the distortion brought upon by the trauma of abandonment which brings the two protagonists to project parts of this very same past onto other characters (something we can see, albeit from the point of view of a parent losing their child rather than the reverse, in *A Pale View of Hills*). While in *The Unconsoled* the secondary characters end up being entirely centered on this projection, to the point their very autonomy in respect to the protagonist is in question, *When We Were Orphans* maintains a veneer of realism that allows us to see how the world reacts to the protagonist's delusions.

That said, the author himself seems to disagree, at least in part, in defining Banks as an unreliable narrator. In an interview for *January Magazine*, Ishiguro states in this respect:

The traditional unreliable narrator is that sort of narrator through whom you can almost measure the distance between their craziness and the proper world out there. That's partly how that technique works, I think. You have to know that distance quite clearly. He [Christopher Banks] is

perhaps not quite that sort of conventional unreliable narrator in the sense that it's not very clear what's going on out there. It's more an attempt to paint a picture according to what the world would look like according to someone's crazy logic. So a lot of the time the world actually adopts the craziness of his logic. It's not full of people doing surprised double takes when he comes out with certain statements. On the contrary, they go along with it. They all seem to support these weird notions.

Interestingly, Banks himself seems to be partially aware of his status as an unreliable narrator, at least in the sense that he knows that his memory has become hazy, at times biased:

[...] over this past year I have become increasingly preoccupied with my memories, a preoccupation encouraged by the discovery that these memories – of my childhood, of my parents – have lately began to blur. [...] I have been obliged to accept, in other words, that with each passing year, my life in Shanghai will grow less distinct, until one day all that will remain will be a few muddled images. (p. 67)

When examining a distant recollection from childhood, he says:

I cannot be sure today how much of my memory of that morning derives from what I actually witnessed from the landing, and to what extent it has merged over time with my mother's accounts of the episode. (p. 58)

And again, about another episode:

Possibly at this point my mother closed the door on him and led me away. I have no further memory of the episode. And of course, I cannot be sure of the exact sentiments, let alone the exact words, my father was uttering that day. But this is how, admittedly with some hindsight, I have come to shape that memory. (pp. 86-87)

In short, Banks seems to be knowledgeable about the Freudian concept of the *Nachträglichkeit* (“afterwardsness”) of human memory and its reconstructive rather than descriptive nature. However, much like Etsuko near the beginning of her narration, it might be a subconscious attempt to make himself look more reliable; by pointing out some of his own flaws in remembering, Banks may be trying to divert the reader's attention from larger, graver distortions of his narration in respect to the actual past, most of all his nostalgia. As Drag notes, “Banks's image of his childhood appears so firmly consolidated, if not fossilized, in his mind that he instantly repudiates other people's divergent recollections” (*Revisiting Loss*, p. 159). An ironic example of this is found when he meets Morgan, a childhood friend of his: “[...] his assertion that I had likewise been a ‘miserable loner’ [...] was such

an astounding one, it took me a little while to realise it was simply a piece of self-delusion on Morgan's part – in all likelihood something he had invented years ago to make more palatable memories of an unhappy period" (pp. 183-184). Here, Banks projects onto his friend what he, himself, has been doing throughout the entire narration; he arguably behaves exactly like Etsuko in this sense, with the difference that, being more well-read and educated, Banks's unreliability is not as apparent.

Ultimately, the unreliable narrator is a device found throughout the entirety of Ishiguro's body of work (perhaps excluding *Klara and the Sun*), due to its status as the most direct and explicit tool to show the self-deceptive nature of memory and the effects of trauma and nostalgia on one's own narrative of the self. Nostalgia and its effects on memory stand at the forefront of the thematic core of *When We Were Orphans*; like in *The Remains of the Day*, it is a tool of self-deception that ultimately stands in the way of a complete process of mourning the past, but unlike Ishiguro's previous novels it also acquires positive value as the groundworks of identity. Ideals and values are forged in childhood, even if this childhood is more imagined than real; from this idealized past world, one can derive hope for the future and, ultimately, the drive to move towards this future. As per his usual *modus operandi*, Ishiguro further explores and expands on these ideas in his following novel, *Never Let Me Go*, from a different perspective thanks to a shift in genre.

CHAPTER 5

NEVER LET ME GO: THE BUTCHERY IN THE GARDEN OF EDEN

Never Let Me Go, published in 2005, is often considered to be Ishiguro's masterpiece alongside *The Remains of the Day*, having made it to the Man Booker Prize shortlist in that same year. Critics, who received the novel with almost unanimous acclaim, were quick to notice that it employed an ageing first-person narrator of limited perspective looking back to their past to make peace with it, a technique that had come to be seen as signature to Ishiguro, but they also pointed out the novel's unique relationship with its genre – in this case, science fiction. "But there's no science here", Harrison points out in his review for *The Guardian*. "This [...] novel isn't about cloning [...] It's about why we don't explode, why we don't just wake up one day and go sobbing and crying down the street, kicking everything to pieces out of the raw, infuriating, completely personal sense of our lives never having been what they could have been" ('Clone Alone'). Similarly, Grossman points out that "*Never Let Me Go* could easily be mistaken for a political novel or a futuristic thriller, but at its dark heart it's an existential fable about people trying to wring some happiness out of life before the lights go out" ('Living on Borrowed Time'). Indeed, *Never Let Me Go* is likely the most apparent example of Ishiguro's 'scavenger' approach to genre, using its elements in service of the story and the message rather than the other way around. That said, I partially disagree with the contention that *Never Let Me Go* is not "a political novel"; while it is true that the author isn't specifically interested in the speculative aspects of the science fiction in question ('what would our society be like if it was both possible and accepted to breed human clones to harvest their organs?'), the metaphorical core of the novel, especially the parts related to the clones themselves, carries, as we will see later in this chapter, heavy political themes alongside the existential ones.

An aspect of the novel that differentiates it from Ishiguro's previous works is the tone of the narration. Kathy speaks "using straightforward conversational idiom, without wishing to camouflage any unpalatable truths with linguistic ploys" (*Revisiting Loss*, p. 164); Stamirowska compares her subdued, understated tone to the one used by Etsuko in her own narration, noting that "both speak in a language of their own, free from cant or affectation" ('After Such Knowledge', p. 156), in contrast with Ishiguro's male narrators who tend to use more sophisticated vocabulary and verbose sentences,

and as such come across as performative. In an interview for the website BookBrowse.com, the author himself stresses the difference between Kathy and his previous narrators not only in tone, but also in quality:

I've been praised in the past for my unreliable, self-deceiving, emotionally restrained narrators. You could almost say at one stage that was seen as my trademark. But I have to be careful not to confuse my narrators with my own identity as a writer. [...] You see, in the past, my narrators were unreliable, not because they were lunatics, but because they were ordinarily self-deceiving. When they looked back over their failed lives, they found it hard to see things in an entirely straight way. Self-deception of that sort is common to most of us, and I really wanted to explore this theme in my earlier books. But *Never Let Me Go* isn't concerned with that kind of self-deception. So I needed my narrator to be different. An unreliable narrator here would just have got in the way. (¶¶ 5-6)

Unlike Etsuko, Stevens, Ono or even Ryder, Kathy is not motivated by a need to justify herself or relieve her own guilt, and as a consequence of this she comes across as far more sincere, direct and straightforward. Her stated aim, now that she is about to stop being a carer and will soon start to donate her organs (thus nearing the end of her life), is to think over the most important parts of her past and put a definitive order to her memories:

I have to admit I'll welcome the chance to rest – to stop and think and remember. I'm sure it's at least partly to do with that, to do with preparing for the change of pace, that I've been getting this urge to order all these old memories. What I really wanted, I suppose, was to get straight all the things that happened between me and Tommy and Ruth after we grew up and left Hailsham. But I realise now just how much of what occurred later came out of our time at Hailsham, and that's why I want first to go over these earlier memories quite carefully. (p. 37)

By recounting her memories from the beginning, Kathy wishes to repossess her own history, now that she's been deprived of everything that was dear to her – Hailsham, Tommy, Ruth, and, soon, her own life. Indeed, perhaps *Never Let Me Go* is, among the novels that have been analyzed so far in this thesis, the one where the concept of loss is the most poignant and pervasive – as can be evinced by the title itself. Like in *When We Were Orphans*, the object of this loss is the idealized childhood, the memory of which is metonymically condensed into the memory of Hailsham. Kathy's narration is steeped in nostalgia from the outset, and she is fully aware of it: "There have been times over the years when I've tried to leave Hailsham behind, when I've told myself I shouldn't look back so much. But then there came a point when I just stopped resisting" (pp. 4-5). Like Banks, Kathy wishes, more or less consciously, to return to a place and time that no longer exist, to the extent that she "tends to

wishfully mistake an ordinary landscape for familiar childhood images” (*Revisiting Loss*, p. 174), a tendency that persists from the beginning (“I might pass the corner of a misty field, or see part of a large house in the distance [...] and I’ll think: “Maybe that’s it! I’ve found it! This actually *is* Hailsham!” Then I see it’s impossible” (p. 6, emphasis in original)) to the end of the novel (“So maybe at some level, I *am* on the lookout for Hailsham” (p. 281, emphasis in original)) despite having apparently accepted the irretrievable loss of Hailsham after Tommy’s death. Both Kathy’s and Banks’s manifestations of nostalgia veer close to what Boym classifies as “restorative nostalgia”, which is aimed at “a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home” (*The Future of Nostalgia*, p. xviii); when faced with the prospect of Hailsham closing for good (thus marking a second, definitive loss of her place of origin), Kathy immediately acts to reestablish her relationships from her formative years and to seek Madame for a “deferral” in the hopes of receiving some more time to make up for the years she and Tommy spent apart. She is only partially successful in that while she does manage to reconnect with Tommy and Ruth, “deferrals” turn out to be nothing more than a myth (in a scene very reminiscent of uncle Philip telling Banks the truth about his parents’ disappearance), definitively sealing the impossibility of returning to the lost home.

The main difference between Kathy’s and Banks’s experience of loss (aside from the former writing from the ‘vantage point’ of having mostly completed her process of mourning already) is that, arguably, Kathy’s forced detachment from her place of origin is not convincingly readable as traumatic. While there is a direct correlation between the traumatic event of the disappearance of Banks’s parents and the end of his ‘golden years’ of childhood, no such event seems to happen to Kathy; in fact, most of her experiences in Hailsham seem rather mundane, and it is only through the benefit of hindsight that they are given significance, as Kathy herself notes: “And if these incidents now seem full of significance and all of a piece, it’s probably because I’m looking at them in the light of what came later” (p. 77). As previously mentioned, she seems to be aware to some degree that her remembering functions more as a “complex process of reconstruction” (*Revisiting Loss*, p. 177) than an objective retelling of events that, taken in isolation, wouldn’t otherwise amount to anything particularly significant. Kathy’s desire to put down a fixed, complete narrative of herself speaks both to her need for closure and her wish to preserve, at least in her memory, the objects of her affection.

The only event from Kathy’s Hailsham years that can possibly be read as traumatic is Miss Lucy revealing to the students their status as clones and therefore future donors. The children’s apparent inability to recall the details in full seem to favor this interpretation:

When I was discussing it with Ruth a few years ago at the centre in Dover, she claimed Miss Lucy had told us a lot more [...] but I’m pretty sure she didn’t. [...] It’s hard to say clearly what sort of

impact Miss Lucy's outburst at the pavilion made. Word got round fast enough, but the talk mostly focused on Miss Lucy herself rather than on what she'd been trying to tell us. Some students thought she'd lost her marbles for a moment [...] there were even some who'd actually been there and who thought Miss Lucy had been telling us off for being too rowdy on the veranda. But as I say there was surprisingly little discussion about what she'd said. If it did come up, people tended to say: "Well so what? We already knew all that." (pp. 80-81)

A scene that the child does not fully understand and that only later in life triggers a traumatic response would fit perfectly with Freud's descriptions of childhood trauma; crucially, however, there does not seem to *be* such a response. While the children's inability to comprehend what Miss Lucy said to them does disrupt the narrative of Kathy's memories, such rupture does not appear to be significant enough to seriously damage it. Furthermore, the suffering of the three main characters as clones is only directly correlated with their biological and social status (which they accept as inevitable) and none of them seem to express signs of a traumatic response to the revelation itself. In fact, what puzzles the reader the most is how unproblematic this revelation seems to them, and how readily they seem to accept it; in accordance with the novel's themes, it is less comparable to a shocking twist and more to a growing awareness of mortality that is part of the process of maturation. That said, Kathy not remembering clearly the details surrounding Miss Lucy's speech and her minimizing its impact on herself and the other children could arguably be construed as an attempt to preserve the positive image of Hailsham she has in her mind. Ultimately, while most of the narrative clues point to it not constituting a traumatic episode, the halo of nostalgia that surrounds Hailsham (and therefore, the partial unreliability of the narrator) make it difficult to judge this episode one way or the other with absolute certainty.

In the following paragraphs, Tommy theorizes that their inability to understand what they were being told about their ultimate fate as donors at that stage of their lives was intentional on the teachers' part:

Tommy thought it possible the guardians had, throughout all our years at Hailsham, timed very carefully and deliberately everything they told us, so that we were always just too young to understand properly the latest piece of information. But of course we'd take it in at some level, so that before long all this stuff was there in our heads without us ever having examined it properly. (p. 81)

This is one of the first explicit signs pointing to Hailsham's double (perhaps duplicitous) nature. The school represents, at once, a shelter where the clones can live a safe, mostly 'normal' childhood,

and “a place of systematic deception, however nobly conceived” (*Revisiting Loss*, p. 168), where the truth about their condition is given to them piecemeal and only when they can absorb it without fully understanding it. In her poignant, climactic confession near the end of the novel, Madame explains the reasons behind Hailsham and why it was built in this way:

You see, we were able to give you something, something which even now no one will ever take from you, and we were able to do that principally by *sheltering* you. [...] Very well, sometimes that meant we kept things from you, lied to you. Yes, in many ways we *fooled* you. [...] But we sheltered you during those years, and we gave you your childhoods. Lucy was well-meaning enough. But if she'd had her way, your happiness at Hailsham would have been shattered. Look at you both now! I'm so proud to see you both. You built your lives on what we gave you. You wouldn't be who you are today if we'd not protected you. You wouldn't have become absorbed in your lessons, you wouldn't have lost yourselves in your art and your writing. Why should you have done, knowing what lay in store for each of you? (pp. 262-263, emphasis in original)

Tommy and Kathy react very differently to this disquieting revelation: the former erupts in a fit of rage, angered at being deceived for so long, while the latter accepts Madame's rationale as she's not willing to give up her idealized image of Hailsham. In her review of *Never Let Me Go*, Atwood seems to side with Tommy: she argues that the name itself of the institution, “[a]s in ‘sham’; as in Charles Dickens’ Miss Havisham, exploiter of uncomprehending children” (‘Ishiguro’s Creepy Clones’) is indicative of its deceptive nature. While it is true that Hailsham is, in a sense, complicit in the clone-farming system in that they do nothing to actually rebel against it, merely making the clones’ fate more palatable, Drag reminds us that “[e]xploitation [...] implies evil intentions, of which the founders of Hailsham seem to have had none” (*Revisiting Loss*, p. 168). Adding to that, Stamirowska notes that “it is not the protagonist-narrator, Kathy, who examines her past in terms of trauma and guilt, but secondary characters, namely, the school teachers” (‘After Such Knowledge’, p. 155), meaning that not only they are fully aware of the moral ambiguity (and perhaps inherent impossibility) of Hailsham’s mission, but that the dilemma of the choice between compassion and truth causes in them a certain degree of trauma that the novel only briefly touches upon. Somewhat like Etsuko, they try to cope by presenting their actions as morally justified, but the novel doesn’t seem to argue in favor nor against Hailsham’s goals, leaving it undecided if deception in pursuit of compassion is morally justified.

On a more general, metaphorical level, the ethical dilemma of Hailsham could be representative of the tension between the necessity of keeping children sheltered from the ‘adult’ world and the educators’ duty to introduce them to that world as they grow up. In his interview for

BookBrowse.com, Ishiguro gives his reasoning behind his choice of a boarding school as a setting for the novel:

The school setting, I must add, is appealing because in a way it's a clear physical manifestation of the way all children are separated off from the adult world, and are drip-fed little pieces of information about the world that awaits them, often with generous doses of deception, kindly meant or otherwise. In other words, it serves as a very good metaphor for childhood in general.

(¶ 13)

Hailsham is an institution dedicated to shielding its students from the cold reality of a society that does not care for them. It is representative of a desire to maintain innocence in its children in the face of a rapidly-evolving culture that, like how Postman posited in *The Disappearance of Childhood*, is seemingly bent on eradicating it. More broadly, Hailsham could be read as a metaphor of the wish to stave off undesirable knowledge and perpetuate an idealistic, likely illusory view of a benevolent world, not only in the child but in the adult as well; Sim states that Hailsham functions as “a symbol of hope, of the human need for sustaining stories and dreams” (*Kazuo Ishiguro*, p. 84). In this sense, it is comparable to the remembered Shanghai of *When We Were Orphans*; just like Banks was attached to his idea of his hometown in his pursuit of justice, so Kathy’s unwillingness to let go of Hailsham can be interpreted as her refusing to abandon her naïve, duty-driven outlook in spite of the overwhelming evidence of its futility. Nevertheless, it is important to note once more that her persisting attachment to her place of origin is not viewed as pathologic like Banks’s was, but as a necessity to keep finding meaning and consolation in the face of the inevitable, incoming end.

The novel’s themes of *memento mori* and the necessity “to get straight” one’s memories before the end are exemplified and made poignant through the clones’ forcibly shortened lifespans. Time compression is a narrative device often used by Ishiguro to better underscore certain points and themes; it was used in *The Unconsoled* especially in regards to Ryder’s extreme forgetfulness (which, in an interview with Krider, the author mentions that it is a perfectly normal human habit and only seems odd to the reader when put in the perspective of a few days rather than years (*Conversations*, p. 133)). Here, the compression of a lifetime (as Kathy writes, like many of Ishiguro’s narrators, from the perspective of someone of considerable age despite being thirty-five) is not a mere narrative device but an integral aspect of the plot, mandated and systematized by the social order in the novel’s world— something that inevitably carries with it political implications for our own world.

The concept of sacrificing children in the name of the future that we’ve seen playing out more or less metaphorically in *A Pale View of Hills* takes on a more literal aspect in *Never Let Me Go*, where

the clones are essentially raised as livestock for their organs; the child's (or rather, the youth's) body sustains that of the older generation in order to keep it alive. Killing the child to preserve the past becomes a systematic and perhaps essential part of society, with all the political undertones this carries. It is a society "obsessed with authenticity and originality as projected sources of stability, of the guarantee that the future will be like the past" (*Killing Children in British Fiction*, pp. 238-239), where the continuation of the past is guaranteed through the sacrifice (or, more accurately, slaughter) of the child, whose essence is reduced to the circumstances of their birth. They no longer possess metaphorical and symbolic value as representations of the future, but merely biological value as replacement parts. Here, the objectification of children that we have seen to be present, in one form or the other, in all of the novels analyzed so far emerges clearly and in full force, showing the consequences of elevating it as a societal paradigm. Two visions of childhood collide in *Never Let Me Go*: Kathy's, who views it as the best part of her life and a memory of the past to be treasured (as she has no future to speak of), and that of 'natural-born' society, incapable of ascribing any value to childhood (either as a past to be cherished or as a future to protect) beyond its material usefulness to the previous generation. While we are not given many details about the dystopian Britain of *Never Let Me Go*, the fact that the average lifespan has surpassed one hundred years and that the farming and butchering of human clones is seen as an acceptable means to that end presupposes some form of gerontocracy. It is also worth noting that the clones, due to their sterility, cannot seem to consciously identify the child with the future, either. The result is, arguably, a society of Etsukos and Sachikos, who have thrown away the perspective for the future that the child embodies in order to perpetuate a static, 'undead' present.

Adding to that, Dean notes that the clones' condition is comparable to that of migrants:

[...] the parallel between the clones and those whose migration status accords them less secure rights than those held by "native" British citizens is central to the ethical and political significance of *Never Let Me Go* and to its uncanny reflection on childhood and youth in recent British history. (*Killing Children in British Fiction*, p. 240)

In the novel, the "native" population is represented by the 'natural-born' people who benefit from the exploitation of the clones. The latter are used for the supposed betterment of society but are not endowed with the same rights as 'real' humans and are thus part of an outsider class. While the clones are identical to 'original' British citizens in every way except the circumstances of their birth, and thus more easily assimilable than any outsider group in the real world, Dean points out that the process of assimilation "can be an uncanny thing, likely to produce paranoia over the hidden other within the innocent migrant just as contemporary British media push fear of the hidden migrant youth within

the refugee child” (*Killing Children in British Fiction*, p. 241). Migration is conspicuous in its absence; the clones’ extremely limited knowledge of the world prevents them from imagining a life beyond the borders that have been drawn in their imaginations, something which represents yet another curtailing of their agency. Unrecognized as ‘real’ British citizens but at the same time unable to leave, the clones seem to be not only ‘children of nobody’ but also “citizens of Nowhere, their lives regarded as lacking any native or authentic substance” (*Killing Children in British Fiction*, pp. 241-242). Unlike what happened in *When We Were Orphans*, where orphanhood was tied to a ‘nomadic’, international identity, in *Never Let Me Go* it seems to only lead towards immobility, lack of agency and loss of identity.

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt introduces the concept of “natality”, the ‘newness’ inherent in the human being after their birth. The consequences of this “newness” are twofold: the child needs to be protected from the world and grow up in a safe environment, but at the same time the world (especially the political sphere) needs to be protected from the ideological and biological novelty that the new human being brings with them, which may disrupt the pre-existing world. Hailsham and the system it represents seems to be an extremization, and at the same time bastardization, of this double need for protection; the students are secluded from the outside world, partially for their own good, and their existence is cut short before they can really develop a sense of their relation to society. Effectively, the potential in their natality is completely stifled, at least in theory, and this is shown through the fact that, while the clones are fully human and have full capacity of agency, creativity and self-consciousness, they don’t display any curiosity towards what makes them so ‘special’ to their educators, nor do they call the clone-farming system into question once they discover its true face. When they do imagine a different future for themselves, it’s not an act of rebellion against the system, futile as it might be, but a way to stave off the thought of their impending fate as “donors” (“another misleading term that defends against reality” (‘Childhood in Action’, p. 200)). In a sense, by treating a societal issue (the donor system) as an existential one (the inevitability of death) the clones never realize the disruptive potential of their natality, and never truly progress from childhood to adulthood.

The institution of Hailsham tries to go against this process of dehumanization by strongly incentivizing its students to produce works of art, as this will somehow prove they have a soul. As compromised and complicit with the system Hailsham is, however, even this is deemed too politically disruptive and ultimately fails.

Rather than caring about the children themselves, Hailsham seems to try to preserve an essentialist idea of childhood in them – that is, that childhood is an inherent, natural phase of life that all human beings go through instead of a social and cultural construct. Therefore, if the clones are meant to be

human, then they must go through childhood as adult society imagines it, most of all by exercising their creativity. Somewhat paradoxically, they are not free to decide this for themselves; when Tommy doesn't display his creative spirit in a way that conforms to the caretakers' expectations, it is treated as a failure of the system. It could be argued that, in its anxious search for proof of the clones' humanity, Hailsham sets up a surveillance (and/or protection) system that turns the students' artworks into a product of the institution itself rather than an organic product of individuality.

This isn't to say that the clones' childhood resembles what we in Western society would define as 'normal', either. The most crucial element is the lack of "a formative relationship with a first other" ('Childhood in Action', p. 195) (that is, the first experience of a relationship with a self outside the self), which would prototypically be a parental figure and more specifically the mother. As the clones are born artificially, there is no mother for them to attach to. Jervis notes that the teachers at Hailsham are not parents, but guardians: they are part of an institution, not of a family, and as much as they can show kindness and consideration towards their students, they cannot ever be considered a first other.

The state of familial loss that represents a common thread through the novels by Ishiguro that are being examined is therefore inherent in the protagonists of *Never Let Me Go* from birth. The clones, whether consciously or subconsciously, yearn for the kind of attachment that can only be formed with a parental figure:

Didn't we all dream from time to time about one guardian or other bending the rules and doing something special for us? A spontaneous hug, a secret letter, a gift? (p. 60)

Interestingly, this longing seems to go in the other direction as well – that of being on the *giving* end of parental affection – as testified by the scene where Kathy listens to the eponymous cassette tape while cradling an imaginary baby (as well as, in a slightly more indirect sense, her desire to become a "carer"). The clones at Hailsham seem to lack any kind of familial bond, and it is not until they have long left the school that Kathy realizes Hailsham itself, as a common place of origin, is the only connection resembling a family they've ever had:

I thought about Hailsham closing, and how it was like someone coming along with a pair of shears and snipping the balloon strings just where they entwined above the man's fist. Once that happened, there'd be no real sense in which those balloons belonged with each other any more ... it was unnerving, to think things weren't still going on back there, just as always. (p. 209)

It is a fragile and utterly artificial connection; to this regard, Jervis notes how "the cord that connects these children to the world has as its source not the softness of a womb, but a fist"

(‘Childhood in Action’, p. 196). Nonetheless, it’s the only one they have, and without it they’re left in a state of perpetual orphanhood. Unusually for Ishiguro’s novels (and, perhaps, unusually in general) this orphan state does not imply a traumatic event, as there simply *isn’t* such an event (since the clones have no parents), not even prior to the child’s come to consciousness. Still, the effects that this innate state of orphanhood have on the clones present some similarities with a traumatic experience. As previously mentioned, one of the key characteristics of trauma is restaging, or repetition without understanding. When Kathy holds an imaginary infant in her arms to the tune of *Never Let Me Go* (as in, the eponymous song), she’s repeating an action that, as a clone with no family, holds meaning to her only in the abstract, intellectual sense. Furthermore, there is an element of ‘temporal paradox’ in that action as she is playing the role of a mother who doesn’t want to lose her child while she, herself, is an ‘inherently orphaned’ child, thus reinforcing the sense of an impossible family. However brief, this marks a point of contact between *Never Let Me Go* and *The Unconsoled*, where the identification of Ryder with other characters plays a vital role in the trauma dynamics.

As previously mentioned, however, attempting to read *Never Let Me Go* through the lens of trauma might be somewhat of a stretch. Ironically, despite being the protagonist of a dystopian science fiction novel, Kathy is arguably the most grounded and well-adjusted of Ishiguro’s narrators; this speaks to how, despite its eventual closure, Hailsham did manage to accomplish its goal of giving the clones a ‘normal’ life to some extent. Out of the context of the novel itself, Drag notes that “[s]urveying Ishiguro’s entire literary output, one can discern a growing appreciation of the role of nostalgic longing” (*Revisiting Loss*, p. 186); while nostalgia had mostly negative, self-deceptive status in *The Remains of the Day* and was treated ambivalently in *When We Were Orphans*, *Never Let Me Go* seems to provide a more positive portrayal of nostalgia as a means of comfort and self-identification – a tool to construct rather than distort one’s self-narrative. This might be one of the reasons why trauma in this novel is only touched upon from oblique, highly obfuscated angles, as Ishiguro likely wanted to highlight the positive aspects of memory in contrast to the bleakness of the dystopian British society that is portrayed in the novel.

Despite not having much to do with trauma, *Never Let Me Go* was chosen for this analysis due to its importance in the portrayal of childhood in Ishiguro’s novel production. In some ways, *Never Let Me Go* places itself in continuity with the author’s other novels: Kathy’s view of her childhood is comparable to Banks’s, and the figure of the ‘object child’, present in every novel that was analyzed in this thesis so far, emerges once again with even more literal clarity. However, when viewed in the light of *Never Let Me Go*’s existential and political themes, those same elements acquire new

meanings that are unique to this novel; what was previously self-deception now turns into strength, and the status of orphan becomes comparable to that of migrant. While this is partially true for every one of Ishiguro's novels, what arguably sets *Never Let Me Go* apart is its masterful use of the elements of the genre (in this case dystopian science fiction) in service of the themes, especially given that the setting is semi-fictional. This will be reprised and taken even further in Ishiguro's following novel, *The Buried Giant*, which represents the author's first foray into fantasy.

CHAPTER SIX

THE BURIED GIANT: LET SLEEPING DRAGONS LIE

First published in 2015, *The Buried Giant* is the first (and, as of writing, only) fantasy novel by Ishiguro. Alone, the novel's classification into this genre caused a significant rift in literary criticism surrounding it. Some, like LeGuin, accused Ishiguro of "slumming" in the genre, appropriating its elements without really understanding its core; others, like Holland, still clinging to preconceived notions of fantasy as a 'popular' genre, simply claimed that "Literary fiction and dragons rarely go together" ('Ishiguro Ventures into Tolkien Territory'). In fact, even some reviewers who praise the novel do so seemingly in spite of its genre; in his review for the *Wall Street Journal*, Sacks says that "[f]or all its fantastical trappings, *The Buried Giant* is a simple and powerful tale of love, aging and loss" ('Kazuo Ishiguro: Quintessentially British'). On his part, the author defended his choice of genre in two ways. On one hand, he affirms the freedom allowed by the genre tropes, claiming that their use is in continuity with his previous works (*The Remains of the Day* in particular) even though they fall outside the genre itself: "[b]eing able to resort to fantasy opens things up enormously. I've often done this, even if it doesn't look so obvious, even if there aren't things that look like mythical creatures. [...] The butler doesn't look like a conventional monster, but I always thought that he was a kind of monster" ('Let's Talk about Genre'). On the other hand, he expresses his perplexity at the strict boundaries that fantasy is often seemingly confined to: "I'm a little bit naïve, maybe, about what the finished thing will look like in terms of genre. It's sort of like I've wandered into people's countries without knowing where I've landed [...] [I]t is quite an exciting time at the moment in fiction. I do sense the boundaries are breaking down, for readers and for writers. Younger readers move very freely between genres and between what used to be fairly strict categories of 'popular' and 'literary fiction'" ('A Language that Conceals').

One of the key aspects of fantasy that Ishiguro employs in *The Buried Giant* to illustrate its themes is the landscape. In his famous essay "On Fairy Stories", Tolkien redefines the genre (which is the foundation of what is contemporarily understood as fantasy) as being inherently environmental:

[...] fairy-stories are not in normal English usage stories about fairies or elves, but stories about Fairy, that is Faerie, the realm or state in which fairies have their being. Faerie contains many things besides elves and fays [...] it holds the seas, the sun, the moon, the sky; and the earth, and all things that are in it: tree and bird, water and stone, wine and bread, and ourselves, mortal men, when we are enchanted. (p. 38)

Ishiguro explains his choice of post-Arthurian Britain as a setting in terms of it being a “historical never-never land, so that it could be applied to all kinds of settings”, which is congenial to his feelings that “[his] territory is to talk about universal human experiences, not to report on what happened at a particular place at a particular time” (‘The Kingdom of Memory’). In other words, the fantasy setting allows both the writer and the reader to better focus on the underlying message and themes of the story without getting too caught up in historical elements. In practice, this also means that, in line with Tolkien’s teachings, the landscape and the environment play a vital role in expressing those themes, perhaps even more than any other novel by Ishiguro. Every ruin, old building, and part of the landscape that the characters pass by or go through is a silent witness (as such, perhaps, comparable to Levi’s “true witnesses”) to the collective trauma of the war that ravaged the land; on their part, the characters, due to their inability (or unwillingness) to remember the past, cannot read the meanings of these signifiers – and, for the most part, neither can the reader. As Lorek-Jezińska says, “[w]e follow the characters in their prospective journey to extract the past from it. Each new place evokes stories told by encountered characters which later on turn out to be memories” (‘Testimonies of Absence’, p. 45). The memory of the landscape thus becomes a metonymic extension of human memory, both individual and collective. We can see it in this passage after Axl and Beatrice have taken refuge from the rain in the ruins of a Roman estate:

“I’m simply grateful, good lady, it still stands as it does. For this house has witnessed days of war, when many others like it were burnt to the ground and are no more now than a mound or two beneath grass and heather.”

[...] “What is it, Axl?” she asked, her voice lowered. “You’re troubled, I can see it.”

“It’s nothing, princess. It’s just this ruin here. For a moment it was *as if I were the one remembering things here.*” (p. 47, emphasis added)

As a material, concrete testimony of an otherwise unmentionable collective trauma, the landscape’s function is to reconnect memory with history by way of triggering repetition: as Caruth suggests, “[t]he historical power of the trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all [...] since the traumatic event is not experienced as it occurs, it is fully evident only in connection *with*

another place, and in another time” (‘Introduction’, p. 8). The environment thus emerges as the only reliable link between present and past, the only key to pierce through the metaphorical and literal fog of amnesia that plagues both the collective and the individual; its language, however, is alien to those who do not wish to remember. On this note, Lorek-Jezińska argues that

The Buried Giant presents the tensions between reading the post-apocalyptic landscape for a specific historical description of the catastrophe that offers revelations about the past and the ambiguous, and contradictory space from which no single interpretation can emerge. (‘Testimonies of Absence’, p. 48)

In other words, at the heart of *The Buried Giant* lies, much like in *A Pale View of Hills* and *The Unconsoled*, a conflict between the duty to remember and the wish to forget which manifests itself through the environment. This element, I would argue, represents a point of contact between this novel and *The Unconsoled*. In the latter, the city functions as Ryder’s “memoryscape”, a pseudo-physical representation of his psyche where traces of his trauma keep appearing, striving for acknowledgement; it is the same, arguably, for *The Buried Giant*, where the mythical Britain serves as the “memoryscape” of a whole community that has tried to forget the ravages of war, a trauma which nonetheless (in keeping with Žižek’s definition) keeps insisting upon the world.

The Buried Giant is, among Ishiguro’s, the novel that is most closely tied to the concept of collective trauma – more specifically, the notion of a collective trauma so terrible that remembrance itself is unbearable, and suppression (materialized in the memory-altering effects of the mist generated by the dragon Querig) is deemed necessary. As said above, an essential part of the novel’s thematic core is the conflict between remembering and forgetting this trauma, a conflict which is embodied in the characters of, respectively, Wistan and Sir Gawain.

Wistan the Saxon warrior has, in the words of Lorek-Jezińska, “the ability to read historical detail from seemingly unreadable features” (‘Testimonies of Absence’, p. 48); he can seemingly derive meanings related to the past from those elements of the environment that no other character can understand. A good example of this special insight of his is him accurately gauging the military capabilities of a building that is now a monastery:

“Or maybe my fears derive simply from what these walls whisper to me of days gone by.”

“What can you mean, sir?”

“Only that no long ago, this place was surely no monastery, but a hillfort, and one well made to fight off foes. [...] Through this watergate would be let past, quite deliberately, a measured number of the enemy. Then the watergate would close on those following. Now isolated between

the two gates, in that space just there, would find themselves outnumbered, and once again, attacked from above. They would be slaughtered before the next group let through. You see how it worked, sir. This is today a place of peace and prayer, yet you needn't gaze so deep to find blood and terror."

"You read it well, Master Wistan, and I shudder at what you show me." (pp. 160-161)

Faithfully to the meaning of his name (literally, "battle stone"), Wistan possesses a keen eye for recognizing traces of massacres and wars past in architecture. This is not only due to his experience as a warrior, but also because his own personal mission is precisely to slay Querig and uncover the truth about Britain's blood-soaked past. He represents the part of those who refuse the call of peace through collective amnesia and instead wish to treasure the memories of past atrocities in order to take revenge, thus perpetuating the cycle of hatred-born collective trauma:

Foolishness, sir. How can old wounds heal while maggots linger so richly? Or a peace hold for ever built on slaughter and a magician's trickery? I see how devoutly you wish it, for your old horrors to crumble as dust. Yet they await in the soil as white bones for men to uncover. (p. 327)

As mentioned in the first chapter, Wistan's stance corresponds to Hirschberger's theories on groups affected by collective trauma: the memory of the wrongs his people have been subjected to further entrenches his identity position as an enemy of the Britons, a hatred which he attempts to pass on to the next generation (represented in the novel by his *protégé* Edwin). Like the characters of *The Unconsoled*, Wistan seems to be driven by a sort of repetition compulsion, a wish to perpetuate the cycle of trauma, with the major difference that this desire is overt rather than subconscious. He even seems to be aware of the self-destructive nature of this desire, yet his hatred and his warrior culture compel him to accept it. Indeed, the necessity for vengeance is apparently so ingrained in Saxon culture that Wistan imagines that warriors doomed to be slaughtered face their death with joy at the prospect that one day their kin will inevitably avenge them:

But [the people in the fort] know that in the end they will face their own slaughter ... it's vengeance to be relished *in advance* by those not able to take it in its proper place. That's why I say, sir, my Saxon cousins would have stood here to cheer and clap, and the more cruel the death, the more merry they would have been. (p. 162, emphasis in original)

Sir Gawain is similarly aware of the self-destructive nature of the cycle of revenge, but, as one of the few remaining representatives of the group who decided to bury the metaphorical and literal giant, he takes a completely opposite stance – to the extent that he sees genocide as a preferable alternative to letting this cycle continue:

Those small Saxon boys you lament would soon have become warriors burning to avenge their fathers fallen today. The small girls soon bearing more in their wombs, and this circle of slaughter would never be broken [...] We may once and for all sever this evil circle. (p. 243)

As a member of the perpetrator group, Sir Gawain finds his group identity diminished by the collective trauma of the horrific war between Britons and Saxons; he cannot reconcile his image of King Arthur as a benevolent ruler with the atrocities committed by him and his knights, and therefore he would rather leave the past behind to be forgotten under the influence of Querig's mist. He is, arguably, the character closest to Ishiguro's 'classic' protagonists, especially Etsuko: ageing, full of regret, and desperately trying to keep his traumatic past buried. While his reasons for doing so seem altruistic, and there is seemingly nothing to make the reader doubt that they are genuine, it is hard to say where his hope for a peaceful future ends and where his selfish wish for absolution through amnesia begins.

Wistan and Sir Gawain's ideological opposition is compounded by their different ages. The physical frailty and redundancy of the three old characters (Sir Gawain, Axl and Beatrice), who belong to the generation responsible for the horrors of the war between Britons and Saxons, are juxtaposed and contrasted with the youthful vigor and martial skill of Wistan, who represents the generation that has suffered the brunt of this collective trauma and thus wishes for a future that will make the previous one redundant and repair the damage it has done. Wistan is characterized like a hero from old Anglo-Saxon epic poems, and his personal quest for revenge corresponds to that, in contrast with Axl and Beatrice's own journey. Falcus and Oró-Piqueras point out that "[t]he linear and climactic story of the heroic quest – and the binary youth/age that lies beneath this – is, therefore, displaced and undermined by Axl, Beatrice and Gawain's repetitive and circular narratives based on endurance in the face of vulnerability" ('Ageing without Remembering', p. 3); they also point out how, unlike the epic stories of Beowulf and other heroes like him, Wistan's quest does not end in a climactic battle but with him putting down, rather underwhelmingly, an old animal already on the verge of death. On the other hand, the journey of Axl and Beatrice, made not of epic deeds but of perseverance and reciprocal support in the face of mundane (yet just as dangerous) perils, ends in success, even if the answer they find is not the one they were hoping for. The two critics argue that the novel makes use of this displacement of the quest narrative in order to make it "clear that the hope of the young as the promise of a brighter and better future is misplaced" and that in doing so "it foregrounds the realisation and psychological growth of older characters rather than the development, or *bildung*, of the young" ('Ageing without Remembering', p. 4). Even Edwin, who represents childhood and the future generations, would fall into the same pitfalls as Wistan and, like his mentor,

“will return the country to bloodshed and conflict” (‘Ageing without Remembering’, p. 4). It is indeed true that Edwin’s future actions are uncertain, given how both sides give him different, contradictory lessons. As his mentor, Wistan tries to get him to follow him in his path of revenge:

There are Britons that tempt our respect, even our love, I know this only too well. But there are now greater things press on us than what each may feel for another. It was Britons took your mother and mine. We've a duty to hate every man, woman and child of their blood. So promise me this. Should I fall before I pass to you my skills, promise me you'll tend well this hatred in your heart. And should it ever flicker or threaten to die, shield it with care till the flame takes hold again. Will you promise me this, Master Edwin? (pp. 276-277)

While Edwin does promise, his certainty seems to waver when Axl and Beatrice try and give him one final lesson (or rather, plea) before parting: “Master Edwin! We both beg this of you. In the days to come, remember us. Remember us and this friendship when you were still a boy [...]” (p. 344).

Edwin’s fate, I would argue, is not as clear-cut as Falcus and Oró-Piqueras make it seem. Rather, he is torn between these two contradictory lessons:

“As he heard this, something else came back to Edwin: a promise made to the warrior; a duty to hate all Britons. But surely Wistan had not meant to include this gentle couple” (p. 344). Even though he goes back to Wistan (“His mother was gone [...] but the warrior was well and waiting for him” (p. 344)), the reader gets the sense that Edwin’s meeting with Axl and Beatrice has changed him on some level and that to some extent he is starting to doubt the warrior’s teachings; while the promise of a better future with a new generation has failed with Wistan, there is likely still hope for Edwin. Unlike the other works analyzed so far, in *The Buried Giant* the child does not seem to be associated with the past, but only with the future. This is caused by a clear separation in the novel between the elderly and the young characters, mostly because they are effectively different characters rather than versions of the same characters viewed at different times as we have seen in previous novels – a distinction further underscored by the use of the limited third person perspective for the narration rather than the usual first person. Furthermore, by contrast, in the novel the past is mostly associated with old age, both of the characters (such as Sir Gawain and Querig) and of the even older ruins and buildings they traverse.

As for Edwin, it is interesting to note that, when the protagonists first meet him, the people in his village believe that he has been infected by an ogre’s bite and thus shun him. Arguably, this presents

an interesting parallel, however faint, between him and Banks; for both of them (and, in a sense, the clones from *Never Let Me Go* as well), the collectivity fears that they have been tainted by their contact with the ‘other’ (the foreign in Banks’s case, the supernatural in Edwin’s). While Banks fully accepts his mission to ‘prove his Englishness’ by resolving an international crisis, Edwin shuns his village and embarks on a wholly new path in life – that of the warrior, with Wistan as his mentor. However, while the latter does recognize in the boy the virtues and talent of a warrior, one could say that we get the sense that Wistan sees him more as a continuation of himself and of his quest. In the passage quoted above, he uses the words “duty” and “promise” (two fundamental values of Germanic culture) to appeal to Edwin’s sense of justice and the devotion and gratitude he feels towards the Saxon warrior, but there is no hint of the latter seeing him as an individual person. Arguably, Wistan’s will towards Edwin represents a continuation of the trend of the objectification of children and childhood by adults that seems to be recurring throughout all the novels that have been analyzed in this thesis; in this case, the child is seen by the adult as an extension of himself, a ‘substitute’ to carry on his ideology (and his quest, should he be unable to complete it). However faint, I contend that this represents a parallel between Edwin and the clones from *Never Let Me Go*, who are sacrificed for the benefit of the gerontocracy; in *The Buried Giant* the child is similarly called to devote his existence to extend the life of the previous generation – this time not in the biological sense, but by accepting and perpetuating its ideology of hatred and revenge.

Axl, on the other hand, does not ask Edwin to swear an oath, but pleads to him to remember the companionship they shared on their journey. While Wistan speaks to Edwin from a position of superiority as his mentor (and in a manner reminiscent of a feudal lord), we get the sense that Axl and Beatrice view the boy as an equal. It is also interesting to note that the two requests have opposite temporal dimensions: whereas Wistan’s requested is projected onto the future as he attempts to pass the torch of his hatred to Edwin, Axl calls for remembrance of the past, and specifically a past represented by childhood. This corresponds to what was said previously with regard to Wistan being a representative of the future and the elderly characters representing the past, but also curiously brings the two together as they both try to teach Edwin about the value of remembrance – one to keep hatred alive, the other to quell it. Perhaps more than any other of Ishiguro’s novels, *The Buried Giant* is centered on the importance of remembering, even if doing so threatens to bring about more pain and suffering; if trauma represents a failure of memory, a disruption in the historical and personal narrative, then it follows that the process of recovering and that of remembering go hand in hand.

While the novel is mainly concerned with an example (or, more accurately, an allegory) of historical and collective trauma, individual trauma plays a role that is just as important. The two are,

in fact, inextricably connected; as Bai says, “collective memory in [*The Buried Giant*] appears within the context of the life path and through the lens of aging. Characters in old age must face their past, individual and collective, for their individual experiences and choices are inextricably linked to it” (‘The philosophy of collective memory’, pp. 3-4). Axl in particular represents the strongest link between the two, as Querig’s mist has erased both his memories related to collective trauma (his time serving as a knight of King Arthur) and those of his own individual trauma (the death of his son). Fittingly, the two are also brought together by the image of the titular buried giant, which is representative of a tragic past that is at the same time forgotten and insisting into the present. Even though they have no explicit reason to, Axl and Beatrice instinctively avoid it (“But there’s one place we need to be cautious. Axl, are you listening to me? It’s when the path goes over where the giant is buried [...] It’ll do us no good treading over such a grave, high noon or not” (pp. 34-35)); this is because, as Lorek-Jezińska puts it, “the buried giant might be seen as the externalization of the intrapsychic tomb that they built inside themselves devoted to their dead son” (‘Testimonies of Absence’, p. 47). The concept of the “intrapsychic tomb” was invented by Abraham and Torok to describe the way a lost object of love comes to gain a life of its own inside the mourner’s fantasy through “the words that cannot be uttered, the scenes that cannot be recalled, the tears that cannot be shed”:

[i]nexpressible mourning erects a secret tomb inside the subject. Reconstituted from the memories of words, scenes, and affects, the objectal correlative of the loss is buried alive in the crypt as a full-fledged person, complete with its own topography [...] A whole world of unconscious fantasy is created, one that leads its separate and concealed existence. (‘Mourning or Melancholia’, p. 130)

Due to the effects of Querig’s mist, Axl and Beatrice have no memories of their son, and therefore have to construct an entirely fictional idea of him – much in the same way that the future generations will have to construct a new narrative about the war between Britons and Saxons after the dragon’s fog forced them to forget. The only way for Axl and Beatrice to address the trauma of the loss of their son is seemingly to embark on a journey towards a destination that, in the end, is revealed to have never existed. This revelation is somewhat reminiscent of that near the end of *When We Were Orphans*, as both definitively seal the irretrievability of the lost object of love and therefore the ‘failure’ of the subject’s quest to rescue it. However, while both Banks’s and Axl and Beatrice’s missions fail in the sense that neither obtains what they were set out to get, their final revelations do manage to provide them with closure and, to some extent, relieve them of the weight of their trauma. In the case of Axl and Beatrice, the trauma of their son’s death is also linked to how they remember

their relationship and how their magically induced amnesia affects it. According to Lorek-Jezińska, “the trauma of loss encapsulated in the couple’s search for their son functions as a displacement of the couple’s fear of and experience of losing each other” (‘Testimonies of Absence’, p. 47). What drives the two in their quest and in their decision to support Wistan’s mission of killing Querig, even more than the search for their son, is the fear of losing each other:

“Yet are you so certain, good mistress, you wish to be free of this mist? Is it not better some things remain hidden from our minds?”

“It may be so for some, father, but not for us. Axl and I wish to have again the happy moments we shared together. To be robbed of them is as if a thief came in the night and took what’s most precious from us.”

“Yet the mist covers all memories, the bad as well as the good. Isn’t that so, mistress?”

“We’ll have the bad ones come back too, even if they make us weep or shake with anger. For isn’t it the life we’ve shared?”

“You’ve no fear, then, of bad memories, mistress?”

“What’s to fear, father? What Axl and I feel today in our hearts for each other tells us the path taken here can hold no danger for us, no matter that the mist hides it now. It’s like a tale with a happy end, when even a child knows not to fear the twists and turns before. Axl and I would remember our life together, whatever its shape, for it’s been a thing dear to us.” (pp. 179-180)

Yet, at the same time, Axl fears what may come with the dispersal of the fog – much in the same way Sir Gawain does:

There had been some reason, and even when Beatrice, triumphant to discover the origin of the mist, had turned to him and exclaimed, he had been able only to reach out his hand to her, still not speaking. [...] He had felt as one standing in a boat on a wintry river, looking out into dense fog, knowing it would at any moment part to reveal vivid glimpses of the land ahead. And he had been caught in a kind of terror, yet at the same time had felt a curiosity—or something stronger and darker—and he had told himself firmly, “Whatever it may be, let me see it, let me see it.” (pp. 177-178)

Those “vivid glimpses of the land ahead” represent Axl’s traumatic memories attempting to resurface – or rather to insist; he is both attracted to and afraid of these memories and what they could imply. Beatrice, on the other hand, seems more certain of her wish to retrieve her memories; furthermore, it is in her that the “displacement” hypothesized by Lorek-Jezińska is most apparent. She seems to live in fear of abandonment, as is made apparent by her needing to be constantly reassured by Axl of his presence, which at first seems to point towards her reliving the trauma of

being left by her husband; yet, when the fog starts to lift and memories start returning, we find out that it was she who abandoned the rest of the family. Similarly, her desire to travel to her son's village turns out to be fueled by her being prohibited by Axl from visiting his tomb as punishment for her infidelity. As the mist retreats, displaced images (a typical Freudian symptom of trauma) are revealed for what they truly are, and, similarly to what happens to the collective trauma of war, the roles of perpetrators and victims turn out to be not quite as clear-cut as they initially seemed.

Ultimately, what lies at the core of *The Buried Giant* is the notion of remembrance, both historical and individual. Much like the detective novel of *When We Were Orphans* and the dystopian science fiction of *Never Let Me Go*, in this novel Ishiguro uses the fantasy genre as an 'echo chamber' in which the general message of the novel can reverberate and its universality made more apparent. As Borowska-Szerszun puts it,

[*The Buried Giant*] actively 'remembers' and exposes the kernels of previous narratives, like the plot outline, a bold character, an image, etc., yet is not concerned with creating a fictional world that would be fully convincing to the readers. It remains a text that stubbornly lingers between fairy tale, romance and fantasy to draw attention to the ideas that have always preoccupied Ishiguro rather than the story itself, unveiling complicated relationships between individual and collective memories, remembering and forgetting, past and present. ('The giants beneath', p. 39)

Perhaps more than any other of the same author, this novel underscores the importance of historical memory, while at the same time exposing its ambiguity. Not only the unwillingness to forget can lead to further suffering (such as what we see with Wistan), but historical memory itself is no less prone (and perhaps even more so) to fictionalization than individual memory; to this regard, Borowska-Szerszun says that "[t]aking into account that creating any narrative is a selective process, the reader is led to conclude that both individual experiences and collective past are subject to fictionalisation, narrativization and interpretation – the processes in which literary transmission plays an important role" ('The giants beneath', p. 38). Nevertheless, I argue that the novel points to remembrance as the only possible path to healing trauma, even if the destination is uncertain; like in the other novels by Ishiguro, one cannot reconstitute their sense of self and the accompanying narrative without repossessing their own history – whether they are an individual or a community. While it might not be only those who forget history that are doomed to repeat it, remembering it is imperative to learn from it; and while digging up the buried giant might bring about more pain, it is necessary to remember what the giant was.

CONCLUSION

In his analysis, Richard Rankin Russell describes Ishiguro by using the title of one of his novels: “*An Artist of the Floating World* might be an appropriate descriptor for him as an author generally, not just the title of his second novel” (‘The (Re)turn to Fantasy’, p. 302). While this comment refers to Ishiguro’s experimentation with genre, I contend that it is also applicable, to a certain extent, to the themes and underlying concerns of his novels. These (including those that haven’t been analyzed here) are fundamentally based on the notion of memory, which, as I have argued throughout, is fallible, prone to narrativization, easily influenced by present circumstances, and generally far less objective than what common sense might suggest – indeed, a ‘floating world’. Every one of Ishiguro’s protagonists is deeply concerned with their memories, which always suffer from distortions to varying degrees; from deeply-entrenched and easily recognizable by the reader (such as those in *A Pale View of Hills* and *The Unconsoled*), to those that are fairly benign and acknowledged by the narrator themselves (like in *Never Let Me Go*), to those that are solely due to external circumstances and are completely outside of their control (*The Buried Giant*).

Trauma plays a vital role in this dynamic, as it often represents the focal point of the distortion. Trauma is related to the idea of fracture or rupture, in this case the rupture of the ‘normal’ functioning of memory; indeed, as was detailed in the previous chapters, what the protagonist is unable or unwilling to remember, or what they subconsciously embellish their memory of, always bears direct correlation with their trauma. Etsuko never speaks of the atomic bombing and projects her parental guilt onto the quasi-fictional figure of Sachiko; Ryder refuses to acknowledge the trauma of his parents abandoning him, or the consequences it has on his own role as a parent, even as evidence of it literally appears before his eyes; Banks paints his own childhood as idyllic, and his self-imposed “mission” is a desperate attempt to turn back time before the rupture; the mythical Britain of *The Buried Giant* finds itself enveloped in a literal fog of amnesia, trying to forget the terrible consequences of a genocidal war. As mentioned in the chapter dedicated to it, *Never Let Me Go* represents somewhat of an exception, as it does not easily lend itself to a traumatic reading; nevertheless, it is arguably an exception that proves the rules, as it is precisely due to the – somewhat uncanny – lack of trauma that Kathy is the most reliable first-person narrator of Ishiguro’s novels (save for *Klara and the Sun*).

The concepts of trauma, loss, nostalgia and self-deception all form part of the complex prism through which the author examines the “floating world” of memory, with each novel proposing a slightly different point of view on it. These concepts are inextricably linked to one another in Ishiguro: loss leads to a traumatic response, to which the individual reacts by employing strategies that often involve selective forgetting and self-deception, of which nostalgia is a prevalent form. Most of the time, the character fails to overcome their trauma due their fatal flaw (the most prominent example of which is Ryder’s narcissism); however, reading Ishiguro’s work in chronological order, the reader can discern a certain increasing optimism in the importance of memory and the human mind’s capacity to use those memories positively. Etsuko and Ryder fail completely to overcome their trauma due to their unwillingness to acknowledge it and move past their self-deception. While Banks seems to be doomed to the same fate at first, his nostalgia eventually proves valuable as the primary foundation for his strong morals; and although he is eventually forced to discard his *raison d’être*, there is a sense that he did manage to move on at least in part. The positive role of memories and nostalgia is further explored and put to the forefront in *Never Let Me Go*, where it represents Kathy’s sole source of consolation in the face of a cold, uncaring society and the looming shadow of death. Finally, in *The Buried Giant*, remembrance, while potentially dangerous, is seen as the sole key to ‘repair’ history and the first step in the path of healing both collective and individual trauma. I contend that this, the importance of memory in repossessing one’s own self-narrative and thus coming to terms with trauma, is what ultimately ties together all of the novels that have been examined in this thesis. *A Pale View of Hills* and *The Unconsoled* present this through negative examples: Etsuko and Ryder’s failure to remember also represents a failure to move on and being stuck in a perpetual cycle of self-deception and, in general, of repeating the same mistakes over and over. On the other hand, in the following novels the protagonists are shown to be able to move past their trauma only when they finally face the truth about their past, either by force or willingly. In other words, memories of the past, even as biased, artificial and easily distorted as they are, are the basis that allows the self, both individual and collective, to move towards the future.

Past, future and nostalgia are deeply connected with the other half of this thesis: childhood – and its counterpart, orphanhood. The figure of the child in Ishiguro always carries some significance as a representation of the past or the future, sometimes both; in either case, the relationship between child and adult is always problematic in one way or another, even if the two are the same person. If memory is always changing due to present circumstances and is thus never actually objective, then there is no simple way for the adult to truly reconnect with their own childhood, the ‘true’ form of which is therefore irretrievable. Consequently, adult-child relationships in Ishiguro always present a seemingly insurmountable distance, which results in what I have called the objectification of the child. Adults

in these novels tend to deny children their agency and personhood, viewing them as extensions of themselves (like Sachiko and Wistan do) or as obstacles to their own self-fulfillment (like Ryder and, subconsciously, Etsuko). *Never Let Me Go* is the most explicit example of this concept due to its literal application in the dystopian society of its world, but it is noticeable, in more or less subtle forms, in all of the novels analyzed in this thesis. The recurrence of this theme acts, I would argue, as a warning that reconnects to what was previously said about the importance of memory and of allowing the past to be a basis for the future. Due to its idealized image in ‘common’ culture, which portrays it as both the most idyllic portion of one’s lifetime and the highest receptacle of potential for the future, childhood is a fitting representative for the passage of time; a lack of care, or even disdain, for childhood is therefore comparable to apathy towards the passage of time, an unwillingness to look in earnest towards either past or future – in other words, being ‘stuck in time’, which comprises a large portion of how trauma is represented in Ishiguro’s novels.

Ultimately, in his novels Ishiguro is mainly interested in the complex, often contradictory mechanisms of the human mind and how they change and are changed by the functioning of memory. Each novel builds upon the previous one in new, sometimes unpredictable ways, all the while keeping that persistent core theme of memory at its core. In a way, this is a reflection of the author’s message about the importance of memory, as his novels almost seem to behave as if they remember their predecessors. Trauma and childhood, however important, are but a part of this immensely complicated “floating world” of memory: the former represents the voids and cracks in its functioning, the latter provides a concrete image of the influence that the passage of time has on memory. Both, like many other tools and quirks of the human mind, converge on Ishiguro’s enduring obsession: memory. Ishiguro’s portrayal of psychology is direct, honest, but far from simple – and all the truer for it.

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